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The Harry Potter universe and all the characters in it belong to J. K. Rowling. I get nothing out of this except enjoyment.

Introduction

A popular speculation among Harry/Hermione fans is what might have happened if Harry had met Hermione first, instead of Ron. This story is based on that premise.

It was originally intended to be a oneshot, but as it grew to more than 20,000 words, I decided to break it up, with a separate chapter for each year. One consequence is that the chapters vary greatly in length.

The format will be a bit unusual, as the scenes shown will consist of the initial meeting of Harry and Hermione before first year, and their subsequent encounters at the beginning of each additional year. The events of each school year will be conveyed through flashbacks. So most of Year 1 will be revealed in summary form at the beginning of Chapter 2, Year 2 at the beginning of Chapter 3, etc.

There's a fundamental assumption that the reader is familiar with the original story; what is presented here will mostly be things that happen differently.

These changes from the story in the books are subtle rather than dramatic, at least initially. The main plot of the story was primarily driven by outside forces, and won't deviate dramatically until Harry begins to take control of the events, rather than react to them. The key is when the closer relationship that Harry will form with Hermione causes a significant enough difference in his actions to affect the plot. You'll have to wait and see which book I think that happens in.

I'm going to try using footnotes – i.e. – (1), (2), (3), etc. – to make comments on various points in the story. Rather than breaking up the flow of the story with inserted author's notes, they will all be compiled at the end of the chapter. We'll see how that works.

Hope you enjoy the story.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

When Harry Met Hermione

1st year

Harry Potter stood in the middle of King's Cross station looking around anxiously, trying to figure out what he should do next. The Dursleys had refused to make a special trip into London; instead his Uncle Vernon had dropped him off on his way to work. As a result he had arrived at the station at 8:00 AM, three hours before the Hogwarts Express was scheduled to depart. Given that he had no idea what or where Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ was, he worried that he might need all that time just to find it.

It hadn't taken long to confirm his uncle's scoffing insistence that such a platform did not exist, at least as far as anyone could see. After a few minutes he decided to stay and watch the area between Platforms 9 and 10, hoping that another student might show up. Taking a seat on a bench, he pulled out his History of Magic text to read while he waited. (1)

An hour later his strategy paid off when another early arriving family showed up. "Are you sure this is the right place?" the mother asked her daughter as the father frowned. "There isn't anything between Platforms 9 and 10." Harry perked up and put his book down, leaning forward to pay close attention.

"Yes mother," the bushy haired girl insisted. "The professor told me how to find it." After a pair of hugs the family said their goodbyes, and the young girl pushed her trolley determinedly toward the wall. And vanished.

Harry blinked. What had just happened? He glanced back at the girl's parents, who were staring at the wall, nearly as surprised as he was.

"Excuse me?" Harry blurted out, hurrying up to the man and woman. "What did she do?" The two adults whirled around to face him, alarmed expressions on their faces.

"What did who do?" the father asked, his eyes shifting back and forth nervously between Harry and his wife. Harry immediately

understood his concern. Fumbling in his pocket he pulled out his ticket for Platform 9 ¾ and held it up to show them.

"I heard what you said, and I need to do the same thing your daughter just did," he explained. "But I don't know how she did it."

The couple relaxed and after looking around to make sure no one could overhear, the mother asked. "So you're a wi... I mean, you're going to Hogwarts too?" Harry nodded.

"She just pushed the trolley into the wall between 9 and 10 and went right through," the father declared. "There didn't seem to be anything else to it."

"Oh. OK," Harry replied, glancing uneasily at the wall in question. If this didn't work it wouldn't be a pretty sight. "Thanks."

The two adults wished him luck and stood back to watch as he attempted to repeat the magical feat they had just witnessed from their daughter. Just as his trolley was about to hit the wall he closed his eyes and winced.

When nothing happened he opened his eyes and found himself on a nearly empty platform beside a scarlet steam engine. Confirming that he was in the right place was a sign hanging overhead with the words Hogwarts Express emblazoned in large letters. Harry let out a large sigh of relief. He'd made it.

In front of him stood the bushy haired girl, taking everything in with wide-eyed wonder. He immediately felt that he'd found a kindred spirit in this presumably muggleborn student. As he approached her she spotted him and gave a shy smile, revealing a rather large pair of front teeth.

"Hi," Harry greeted her as he pulled his trunk and Hedwig's cage off the trolley. "I'm Harry."

"I'm Hermione," she replied quickly, putting out her hand to shake his. "Hermione Granger."

Not knowing what to say next, Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets and nodded his head back to the wall they'd just come through. "I,

erm, just met your parents. They told me how to get onto the platform."

"Really?" Hermione challenged. "Didn't you remember how to do it?" Harry explained that no one had told him and Hermione gave him a skeptical look, as though not really believing that a professor could have made such an oversight. Lacking any explanation, Harry shrugged and suggested they board the train. Being the only two students on the platform this early, they really had no choice but to share a compartment, as it would have been rather rude to separate. Not that they had any inclination to do so. As they helped each other stow their trunks, Harry joked about how heavy hers was.

"Just how many books did you bring?" he teased. Rather than smiling at the jibe, Hermione stiffened up and glanced away. Harry realized that he'd struck a nerve. "Hey, don't worry about it," he continued apologetically. "I like to read, too." Those were apparently the magic words as his companion brightened immediately. Harry added that his favorite magical book so far was History of Magic.

"Oh, I liked that one too," Hermione agreed enthusiastically. "I'm looking forward to that course ever so much. My favorite, though, is Hogwarts, A History. I presume that you're muggleborn as well? I've actually read all the books that were assigned. I hope we're not at too much of a disadvantage. I've tried a few simple spells, just for practice of course, and they've all worked for me." She paused to take a breath and dropped her eyes with a slight blush, as she realized that she hadn't given him a chance to get a word in for a while. "I'm sorry. I tend to prattle on sometimes when I get excited."

Harry grinned – she was as excited as he was. "That's OK," he reassured her. "I'm not very used to people talking to me." Hermione's eyebrows rose questioningly, but Harry didn't want to explain that right now. He responded that he wasn't familiar with Hogwarts, A History (Hermione assured him that he could borrow her copy), that he hadn't tried any spells since he'd been told they weren't allowed to (she sheepishly admitted that she'd been told that too, but couldn't resist) and that he wasn't exactly muggleborn. That one brought her up short, but before she could ask what he meant he explained.

"I was raised by my aunt and uncle who are muggles," he revealed. "I didn't know anything about magic until a month ago on my

birthday. My real mum and dad were killed when I was a baby." Hermione gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze as he looked down at the floor. He could tell she wanted to inquire further but was trying to be polite. After a few moments' thought he decided that she would find out who he was eventually and it was better to be upfront about it now.

"I'm Harry Potter."

Hermione's eyes went wide and she gasped. "Are you really?" She went on to declare that she'd read all about him and listed three reference books that told his story. He was skeptical, questioning how accurate they could be, since as far as he knew he was the only survivor of that night. Hermione promptly apologized for her insensitivity and offered to let him read them. Once that was out of the way the two settled down and began to tell about themselves.

When Harry expressed his amazement at her claim to have learned all the year's texts by heart, Hermione pointed out with a touch of embarrassment that she'd had nearly a year, since her birthday was in September. She'd wanted to do everything she could to make certain she wasn't behind her classmates. Harry sensed that her know-it-all behavior was to a large extent a way to cover up her insecurity. Gradually the two new students grew more comfortable with each other, falling into an easy camaraderie as they discovered they had quite a bit in common.

Both children confessed that they'd never had friends, and were very glad to meet each other. Both had been ostracized at their previous schools, although Hermione not as much as Harry. She was aghast when he revealed that he'd been forced to deliberately do poorly in his schoolwork so as not to be punished for showing up his cousin. She declared heatedly that she'd not let him even consider such a thing at Hogwarts! They briefly discussed what they'd read in their course books, and Hermione demonstrated one of the spells she'd learned by fixing his broken glasses. Harry decided that his new friend was simply brilliant. She showed him some other spells she'd learned and he tried them out. He soon realized that this Hermione Granger was a very good person to know!

The conversation turned to the houses at Hogwarts, and Hermione recited what she'd read about each of them. She wondered if they

were allowed to request a house, or if they were simply assigned to one. Harry offered the opinion that Ravenclaw would suit her best, but he wasn't sure about himself. Hermione thought she might rather have Gryffindor. The two shared a shy smile as they agreed that they hoped they'd end up together.

About an hour and a half after had Hermione arrived at the station, but still a half hour before their scheduled departure, quite a few more students had begun to show up. Hermione wondered nervously if they should change into their school robes. Harry noted that some students were already wearing them, but others were not. They decided that perhaps it was a good idea to do it then, before it got too crowded. At that point both glanced awkwardly at each other. With a touch of embarrassment, Hermione explained that she'd asked Madame Malkin when she bought her robes, and had been informed that only underwear was worn beneath them. (2)

Harry glanced around, not seeing any changing rooms available, so he suggested that they close the blinds and he'd stand outside the door, and when she'd finished they'd switch. Hermione agreed, and he went out into the corridor to stand guard. While waiting he determined that he would not think of Hermione inside the compartment in her underwear, so naturally, he could think of nothing else. By the end of the previous school year nearly all the girls in his class were wearing bras, whether they needed them or not. From what he'd noticed of his new friend, she was one of the ones that did. Trying to get his mind off that area of her anatomy, he next found himself wondering what color her knickers were. Groaning to himself, he resolved to concentrate on the doorknob until she was finished.

Suddenly the door opened, and Hermione was standing before him attired in her new robes. Harry couldn't help shooting a glance at the small bumps on the front of her robes, but fortunately, Hermione had no experience with boys checking her out so she didn't notice. She gave a quick twirl and asked him how they looked, and he nodded his approval. Back inside their compartment while she took her turn outside, he quickly changed, glad to be rid of Dudley's shirt and trousers that didn't fit. While on the subject of his hand-me-downs, he decided to ask Hermione if she could repair his taped up trainers too.

It occurred to him that he was becoming close friends with a girl. Not like a girlfriend, though, he wasn't ready for that yet. She would just be a friend who was a girl. But now that he thought about it, that could work out well for him down the road. When he did get to the point where he wanted to date a girl, he would already know her. And even if he didn't date her, she could help him out with other girls. It was a win-win situation.

Soon other students began to arrive. One was a distressed round-faced boy named Neville who was looking for a lost toad. Harry and Hermione introduced themselves, and shared a smile at Neville's reaction to hearing Harry's name. Hermione offered to go help Neville look for his toad, instructing Harry to hold down the fort. The nod of understanding she gave him as she left let him know that she realized that he'd rather not wander through the train sticking his head in each compartment and subjecting himself to all the stares of his fellow students. Harry nodded back his appreciation and settled backing his seat to look out the window.

Only a few minutes before the train was due to leave Harry noticed a family of redheads come onto the platform. They looked like an interesting mix – a rather pompous older brother, a pair of twins who sounded like troublemakers, a nervous looking boy who Harry guessed was a first year like himself, and a younger sister who was clearly too young for school yet. Minutes later his compartment door slid open and the youngest redheaded boy looked in. "Can I sit here?" he asked. "Everywhere else is full." Harry grinned and nodded, gesturing to the seat across from himself.

Harry was a bit annoyed when the new boy, who introduced himself as Ron Weasley, stared at him and had the nerve to ask to see his scar, but he sighed and complied, moving his hair aside to reveal the oddly shaped disfigurement. (3)

Ron spent a few minutes telling about his family, and was in the process of describing the unique wizarding sport called Quidditch when Hermione and Neville returned with Neville's toad. Hermione took her seat next to Harry while Neville settled in next to Ron, and Hermione briskly introduced herself.

The rest of the train ride went relatively smoothly, as the four new students became acquainted with each other. There was some unpleasantness when Draco Malfoy arrived to introduce himself and

arrogantly inform Harry about who the 'right sort' of people were. These comments set Ron on edge and for a few moments it looked like a fight might break out before the haughty blonde decided the odds weren't in his favor and left. A snack trolley arrived just past noon, giving Ron and Neville the opportunity to explain wizarding sweets. Hermione looked dubiously at the chocolate frogs, but was eventually persuaded to try one.

Harry had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing at Hermione's indignation when Ron tried to cast a spell on his rat, Scabbers.

"That can't be a real spell! It doesn't sound anything like any spell I've read about. Where did you learn it?" the bushy haired young witch demanded.

Ron sullenly admitted that he'd got the spell from his brother, George, who he suspected was playing a joke on him. Upon hearing this Hermione launched into a mini lecture on the etymology of spell terminology, which she had read about in one of her reference books.

Neville stared at her, amazed that a muggleborn first year could know so much about magic. Harry shook his head in amusement, while Ron sat back and scowled. He really didn't care for this bossy know-it-all, but he could see that she and Harry were friends, so resolved to try to put up with her.

The wide-eyed wonder was back on the faces of the two newcomers to the magical world when they reached Hogwarts. The four new friends shared a boat on the ride to the castle, gasping in awe at the first sight of the magnificent structure. They huddled together as they waited to enter the Great Hall, Hermione nervously reviewing spells that she might be tested on under her breath until Harry took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

As they entered the imposing chamber Harry's jaw dropped as he looked up past thousands of floating candles to see what was apparently empty sky, with stars twinkling in the darkness.

Seeing this, Hermione leaned close and whispered to him that the ceiling was enchanted to mimic the sky outside. "I read about it in *Hogwart's, A History*," she added, with a self-conscious smile. Harry grinned and squeezed her hand again.

Hermione was the first of their group to be sorted. Harry gave her an encouraging pat on the back as she nearly ran up to the stool and jammed the Sorting Hat eagerly on her head.

"Gryffindor!"

Harry shot her a smile, which she returned before hurrying over to the table where her new housemates cheered her arrival. Neville's name came up a short time later, and he was sorted into Gryffindor as well. Soon Harry's name was called. A loud murmur went up from the students as the most famous wizard of their generation stepped forward.

After being assured by the Hat that he would do well in any house, Harry asked to be placed in Gryffindor with his friends. When his wish was granted he couldn't help grinning as Hermione and Neville stood with their new housemates to cheer his selection, joining in the Weasley twins' chant, "We got Potter! We got Potter!" Harry squeezed in next to Hermione and she couldn't resist giving him a quick hug while he exchanged handshakes with the students sitting nearby.

Finally Ron was called, and it took only a few seconds for the hat to call out, "Gryffindor!" again. Harry applauded with the rest of his house as Ron's brothers welcomed him to the table. Amazingly enough, the four new friends had all ended up in the same house. Harry and Hermione shared a smile. This was going to be a great year!

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(1) According to Book 1, Harry considered his books very interesting, and read them late into the night during the month before he went off to Hogwarts. He found the name Hedwig in History of Magic.

(2) Although the movies show the students wearing uniforms under their robes, the books don't say anything about uniforms. But they also don't say much else, just that students change into their robes on the train. However, in Book 5, when James turns Snape upside down in 'Snape's worst memory', Snape's underwear is revealed when his robes fly up. Therefore, I choose to assume that robes are worn in the fashion indicated.

(3) At this point Harry is more at ease with his introduction to the magical world, having talked with Hermione for two hours and made two friends already, than he was in the book when he met Ron. So he's not as nervous, and more likely to be annoyed when Ron asks to see his scar (which neither Hermione nor Neville did).

2nd year

Hermione had to force herself to not hold her breath as she waited to hear the results of her father's phone call. Something had happened at Harry's house – that is – something additional had happened. The first oddity of this summer had been when she hadn't received any reply from Harry to the letters she'd sent him. After two weeks of steadily increasing worry on her part at not having any communication from him, she'd checked with Neville and Ron – they hadn't heard from Harry either. That had prompted her to attempt to contact him by telephone. (1)

She'd had the good sense to call during the day, and so avoid having to talk with Harry's uncle, who might have refused to let him come to the phone. It had been a close call with his aunt, but she'd eventually relented. Hermione had been relieved to learn that Harry was all right, and that he was just as perplexed as she was about the missing letters. He explained that he hadn't been able to send any of his own because his Uncle Vernon had locked Hedwig in her cage. At that point they'd abandoned owl post and stuck to muggle means of communication. Harry's aunt had established strict guidelines for their use of the phone, foremost among them that Harry was not allowed to call her, so that no charges would appear on the Dursley's phone bill.

Their phone privileges had abruptly ceased a few days ago without any explanation other than a terse statement that Harry was no longer permitted to use the phone. Hermione could only conclude that he was being punished for something, which she surmised was most likely to do with magic. This conclusion had prompted Hermione, after some agonizing, to request her father's intervention, as she could readily imagine that Harry's physical well-being might be at risk.

Mr. Granger was a rather imposing individual from outward appearances, although he was quite pleasant with his family and friends. From a Dursley perspective, he'd gone to the 'right' schools, had a very respectable profession, lived in a high-class neighborhood, and drove an expensive automobile. Somehow he was able to communicate this proper breeding over the telephone. His brisk, no-nonsense, "Hello, I'm Dr. Granger, I'd like to speak with Vernon Dursley please," which opened the conversation established

who was in control from the outset. From there on it was a matter of maintaining the proper balance of assertiveness and understanding.

As she forced herself to settle down and wait, Hermione thought back over the previous year. It had been positively wonderful, making new friends and learning so much magic! She had finished the year ranked first in her class! And nearly as satisfying to her was that Harry was in the top ten, and second in Gryffindor. Despite many temptations and distractions, he had always been willing to buckle down and study with her when he needed to. Neville had tried hard, too, but didn't have very good control over his magic. Unfortunately, she couldn't say the same about the effort from her other friend, Ron. He had clashed repeatedly with her over the amount of time she spent on her coursework, and often complained about what he considered her 'corrupting' influence on Harry. (2)

But there had been some rather disturbing, not to mention downright terrifying, episodes at Hogwarts during their first year of study. An encounter with a troll that had been let loose in the castle on Halloween. Watching in horror as Harry nearly fell to his death from a jinxed broom. Smuggling a baby dragon out of the castle. Running into a dark creature that had been killing unicorns, while serving a detention in the Forbidden Forest. And finally, the adventure that had concluded the year, when she, Harry, Ron, and Neville had fought their way through the traps protecting the Philosopher's Stone in their attempt to keep it from being stolen. (3)

They'd worked well together. Neville had immediately recognized the Devil's Snare and known how to disable it. Harry had led them in chasing down the flying key on a broomstick, Ron had taken charge of playing through the gigantic animated chess set, and she had solved the potions riddle. But there had only been enough potion in the vial for Harry to go on to the final confrontation. She'd waited anxiously with Ron, who'd been knocked unconscious in the chess match, while Neville had gone back for help. (4)

Harry had survived the encounter with their possessed Defense instructor, but it had been a close call. He'd been unconscious in the hospital wing for three days, during which his friends had rarely left his side, taking turns sitting by him while the others went to class and meals. During her time alone with him she'd held his hand and whispered fervent pleas for him to get better soon. She was amazed at how important a part of her life he'd become.

Hermione was broken from her thoughts by her father's voice as he reached the conclusion of his argument with Harry's uncle. He shot her a wink as he began to close the deal.

"Well, Mr. Dursley, I certainly understand the need for discipline, but it seems to me that your family might benefit by some separation from your nephew. Give things a chance to settle down a bit. Like I said before, in my profession I'm required to follow up when I hear about domestic situations that have the potential to escalate to violence. Removing the boy from your household for a time would seem to me to resolve that issue without too much difficulty. And it just so happens that my daughter would like to invite your nephew to spend the rest of the summer with us. No, it's no trouble at all ..."

Hermione broke into a smile. Her father was positively brilliant! Being careful not to interrupt his phone conversation, she wrapped him in a rib-crushing hug.

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The next morning she carefully pondered her choice of clothing as she got ready to go with her parents to pick up Harry. The thing of it was – over the course of the past year Hermione had developed curves. Her body was no longer a straight drop from shoulders to knees; it now went in at the waist and out at the hips. Her breasts were still small but that was OK; all in all everything was coming along nicely. The challenge was in deciding how best to display her improved figure to her best friend.

What she really wanted to do was put on a pair of short shorts and a skinny tank top, but she knew that would be too much, too soon. She finally settled for a pair of capris that fit snugly around her hips, combined with a short sleeved tee shirt made from a stretchy fabric that accented the curves of her waist and bust. There was nothing specific that her parents could object to, but the outfit would get the message across. And that message was that Hermione was not just one of the guys.

Her long term goal was that this year the three boys she hung around with (particularly Harry) would recognize that she was a girl. Third year, when they gained the privilege of Hogsmeade visits, was

when Hogwarts students customarily began dating. If all went according to plan ... well, they'd just have to wait and see.

She knew she'd have plenty of competition. Besides her, the girls Harry was closest to were his quidditch teammates. Alicia and Angelina were two years older, and tended to treat Harry as a little brother. But Katie Bell was another matter. For now, Hermione would focus on having a good time with her best friend for the rest of the month. But she would also take the opportunity to begin to nudge his thoughts in another direction.

When they arrived at Privet Drive Harry was waiting on the front porch with his trunk and Hedwig's cage. As they pulled into the driveway Hermione's father nudged his wife and motioned up at the second story bedroom window. It was covered with bars. Hermione suddenly had an image of her best friend as a prisoner who was being let out on parole.

As soon as the car stopped, she was out the door and racing for the house, catching Harry up in an enthusiastic hug. Harry's eyes went wide just before she reached him, as he took in her outfit and what it revealed, and she couldn't help grinning as she wrapped her arms around him. Perfect!

Harry pulled away after a few seconds, and shot a nervous glance at her father, expecting that he might not be too thrilled to have a boy in such intimate contact with his daughter, best friend or not. Hermione smiled and gave his hand a squeeze of reassurance, but it was unnecessary. Mr. Granger was directing an even but pointed stare at his Uncle Vernon. The message was clear – I know how you've been treating your nephew and it better not happen again next summer.

Hermione only just managed to hold her question until they were in the car and driving away. After her parents warmly greeted her best friend, she pulled him around to face her.

"Harry!" she burst out. "What happened?"

It took Harry a few seconds to compose his thoughts before he could answer, being a bit overwhelmed by her greeting and his sudden reversal of fortune, having been so quickly transferred from

the custody of his abusive relatives to the company of this affectionate family.

"Have you ever heard of a magical creature called a house elf?"

Harry's explanation of the strange creature and his bizarre behavior (while downplaying the cryptic warning) took up a good part of the drive to the Grangers' house, especially with Hermione interrupting him for points of clarification every so often. While the whole episode was unsettling, she at least felt better that they had an explanation for the missing mail. All three Grangers agreed that the first order of business would be to give Harry a proper birthday celebration. (5)

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As much as the first month of summer had seemed to creep along at a snail's pace, the second month seemed to pass by in no time at all. With Hermione's help, Harry's summer homework was completed fairly quickly, and they had the rest of the time to relax and enjoy one another's company. At the local library they found some books that Harry enjoyed reading, and they took frequent walks around Hermione's neighborhood as she shared stories of things she'd done growing up. Harry even helped Mrs. Granger with her gardening, discovering that putting those skills to work was much more enjoyable with nice people who worked alongside him and appreciated his help.

As for Hermione's other goal, Harry soon became accustomed to seeing her in muggle summer clothing, which was of course far more revealing than their school robes. From the discreet glances he'd send her way occasionally when she wore something particularly tight fitting, she was certain that he'd got the message loud and clear – Hermione Granger was a girl.

One afternoon while they were sitting out on the Grangers' back porch admiring the flower beds they'd been working on earlier, Hermione asked (trying to keep the hopefulness out of her voice) how he was enjoying his summer.

"It's been brilliant! The best summer I've ever had, by far!" Harry responded quickly, causing a beaming smile to break out on her face. Seeing that, Harry grinned back. He must have spotted the relief in her expression, because he added teasingly. "Now, if there

were only a place where we could go flying it would be perfect." Hermione responded appropriately, she thought, by rolling her eyes in mock exasperation.

Before they knew it, it was time to go to Diagon Alley for their school supplies. They went first thing in the morning, trying to beat the crowds, but hoping they might run into Neville and/or Ron later in the day. Their first stop was at Gringotts, where Harry got a lesson about banking. As they entered the bank he and Hermione overheard her father grumbling about exchange rates. Hermione quickly explained that the goblins made money on every transaction – when you exchanged pounds for Galleons there was one rate, but the conversion from Galleons to pounds was considerably different.

Harry thought for a moment, then interrupted the Grangers before they got in line for a teller. "Wait," he suggested. "Let's go to my vault first. I want to show you something." Mr. and Mrs. Granger exchanged uncertain looks, but then assented. As they headed to the carts that would transport them to the underground vaults, Harry suddenly stopped and turned to the other three.

"Do you like roller coasters?" he asked. Puzzled at this apparent non-sequitor, the Granger adults nodded, then looked at Hermione, who shook her head uneasily. "Well, then she'd better sit in the middle."

By the time they reached Harry's vault, Hermione had silently resolved to kill her best friend, or at least find some unpleasant payback. He'd sat up front next to their goblin guide grinning all the way down while she fought to retain her breakfast. To his credit, he did help her from the cart, and held her arm while she wobbled uncertainly and tried to regain her equilibrium. All thoughts of discomfort vanished as soon as the door to Harry's vault opened.

"Oh my!" she breathed softly, taking in the mounds of gold, silver, and bronze coins. Her parents were speechless, glancing several times from the piles of treasure to the unassuming boy who'd been almost literally dressed in rags when they'd met him. Even the most cursory calculation would indicate that Harry's bank balance greatly exceeded their own.

"How much is this?" Hermione blurted out before clapping a hand over her mouth in embarrassment. She knew very well that Harry

was uncomfortable with his wealth. Before she could figure out a way to rescind her question Harry just shrugged.

"I never asked," he admitted. "And I don't really care that much. It's enough to last me a while, I reckon." Then he turned to her parents.

"So, I was thinking, how about if I pay for Hermione's school books?" he offered. "Then you wouldn't have to exchange anything." Caught off balance, the Grangers tried to refuse, but Harry persisted, pointing out that they'd put him up for a whole month free of charge, not to mention all the clothing they'd bought him. It was only fair that he be allowed to reciprocate. Not having any counter, and still a bit stunned at the sight of all this gold, they agreed, whereupon Harry scooped up two bags of coins and they returned to the cart. On the way out he took Hermione aside and cautioned her not to say anything to Ron, and she quickly agreed.

From that point on it was an enjoyable excursion, right up until they reached their final stop, the bookstore Flourish and Blotts. There, their desire to avoid the crowds was finally thwarted. They soon discovered the reason for the throng – a personal appearance by Gilderoy Lockhart. At that point everything went horribly wrong!

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Hermione sat glumly in her room, dismayed at the turn things had taken as the summer drew to a close. She and Harry had been at odds ever since their shopping trip to Diagon Alley and their encounter with Lockhart.

She had been giddy at the opportunity to meet the well known and amazingly accomplished wizard. It had absolutely nothing to do with how good looking he was! Admittedly, he'd pulled Harry up in front of everyone to have their picture taken together, but there was no way he would have known how much Harry hated things like that. It was all a misunderstanding. And he had presented Harry a complete set of his books at no charge.

But Harry had been so disgruntled with the whole thing that he'd promptly handed the valuable texts off to Ron, who happened to enter the bookstore just as Harry was storming out, muttering about what a fake Lockhart was. Hermione had been about to chide Harry for making such an inappropriate comment about their new

professor when she'd encountered Lucius Malfoy. He had stopped and looked at her for a moment and it appeared as though he was contemplating something before he turned away and moved on. She'd had to hurry to catch up with Harry, but a minute later they heard the sounds of a scuffle behind them. They'd looked back to discover that Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Weasley had somehow got into a fight!

She'd been mortified at what her parents would think, but they'd been more impressed at the way Harry had stepped protectively in front of the three of them than they'd been bothered by the childish behavior of the two adult wizards. But the family had been so shaken up by the episode that they'd cut their outing short and returned home.

During the drive Harry had continued to say rude things about Lockhart and Hermione had hotly defended him. Things had deteriorated rapidly after that, and by the time they arrived home the two friends were no longer speaking to each other.

She hated being on the outs with Harry. They normally got along so well together, and they'd been having so much fun! But she just didn't know what to do about it.

"Hermione, I'd like to talk with you," came the voice of her mother at the door.

"Sure, Mum," she replied, moving over on her bed to make room for her mother to sit beside her.

"I have something I want you to think hard about," her mother stated as she gave her hand a compassionate squeeze.

"Is being right and winning an argument more important than a friendship?"

Some time later Hermione came downstairs to join Harry and her parents in the living room. Harry had finished his packing and was leafing resignedly through one of Lockhart's books, *Travels with Trolls*.

"Can we talk about ... this?" Hermione asked softly, gesturing to the book in Harry's hands.

With the aid of Mr. and Mrs. Granger, they were able to have a calm, reasoned discussion and arrive at a compromise of sorts. Hermione reluctantly agreed that Lockhart was, in her father's words, 'a pompous arse'. Harry agreed, also reluctantly, that even so it was possible that he could be an effective instructor, particularly after the Granger adults both declared that they'd had several professors with that unfortunate characteristic in their university courses, who'd nonetheless been able to adequately convey their subject matter.

Harry argued that being a five time winner of Witch Weekly's 'Most Charming Smile Award' was not a qualification to teach anything, much less Defense Against the Dark Arts. Hermione had no choice but to admit the truth of that, but countered that it didn't automatically disqualify him for the position either. In her opinion, it was more significant that he was an honorary member of the Dark Force Defense League.

Hermione argued that just because Harry disliked Lockhart and the way he acted, it didn't necessarily follow that he was a fraud. Harry conceded the point, but made Hermione promise to keep an open mind should he come up with any evidence that the man was an imposter.

Harry's most telling point, which surprised Hermione with its insightfulness, was that the books didn't say how Lockhart had done all the things he claimed to have done, and therefore were pretty much useless as textbooks. When Hermione could only stare open-mouthed at that revelation, her mother joked that she presumed that there would be more to the course than students being required to memorize and be quizzed on their professor's many adventures. She added with a significant look at her daughter that since Harry suspected that some of his claims might be fraudulent, perhaps some extra research in the library might either refute or corroborate those claims.

At the end both students stood up and a teary eyed Hermione wrapped Harry in a fierce hug. "I couldn't bear to lose your friendship over this, or anything else," she whispered.

"Don't worry, you won't," he murmured back.

-ooo-

The next morning everyone was more relaxed as they made their way through King's Cross station, relieved that the two friends had sorted things out. The pair was also much more confident than they had been a year before, when they'd first begun their adventure in the magical world.

At least they were, right up until they crashed into the quite solid wall between Platforms 9 and 10.

The perplexed students picked themselves up off the floor and righted their trolley, trying to figure out what had happened. As Harry had ended up doing the prior year, they waited for someone else to come along. But to no avail, as everyone else went through the barrier just fine. Even when they tried to follow directly behind some of their fellow students, they were still shut out. Frustrated, Harry wondered aloud if the strange elf, Dobby, that had caused him so much trouble at Privet Drive might be involved somehow.

At length one of their classmates, who Hermione identified as Susan Bones, showed up with her parents and her aunt, who had the air of someone with authority. When even she couldn't pull Harry through the wall, she decided with a humorless expression that someone was jinxing the barrier as a prank. She solved the problem by holding him back and sending Hermione and the rest of her party through, then apparated him to the platform. (6)

Once they were successfully on the other side, Harry explained to Madame Bones about Dobby. After listening thoughtfully, she assured him that she would take care of his notice for doing underage magic, asked her niece Susan to keep her informed, and left. As the three students boarded the train, Susan explained that her aunt Amelia was the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and had a good reputation for getting things done.

Susan stayed with them, and on the train they spotted Neville and the four of them settled into a compartment together. Neville and Susan already knew each other, and Harry and Hermione found themselves making a new friend. The Gryffindors explained how they had won all those points at the end of the prior year, and Susan was suitably impressed. They continued to entertain her with stories of some of the other adventures they'd shared.

It didn't take Hermione long to notice that Susan was quite obviously in awe of Harry. Somewhat possessively, she moved closer to Harry, sending a subtle message to the other girl. Susan turned out to be very nice, however, which in turn made Hermione feel a bit guilty about her behavior. She didn't move away from Harry, though.

At the last minute Ron finally showed up, this time with his little sister in tow. "Hi guys ..." he began, before noticing Susan in the compartment, and he trailed off, clearly wondering what she was doing with his Gryffindor gang. "Erm, this is Ginny ..." he continued. But as he began to introduce his redheaded sibling and the others focused their attention on her, she gave a small squeal, turned red, and ran from the compartment.

Ron shook his head in exasperation. "She's not usually this shy. She's been going on and on all summer about meeting Harry Potter." He grinned at his fellow Gryffindor and now it was Harry who turned red. Hermione patted his hand sympathetically, but insisted that Ron track his sister down and bring her back to introduce her properly.

To her surprise, Susan took that opportunity to get up and move across to sit on Harry's other side. With an innocent smile on her face, she gestured to the larger empty space beside Neville. Harry and Neville nodded in understanding – now there was room for two people on that seat and Ginny would likely be more comfortable sitting next to her brother (and away from Harry). But Hermione narrowed her eyes slightly, her suspicions about Susan's intentions reawakening. She couldn't help being aware that Susan was noticeably curvier than she was, and decided that she would suggest that they all change into their (more concealing) Hogwarts robes as soon as possible.

Just then Ron and Ginny returned, and although the younger girl joined them, she practically hid behind her brother, tucking herself into a small space between him and the door. While she never did say anything, she was clearly unhappy to see Hermione and Susan sitting so close to Harry.

Hermione felt sorry for the poor little girl, but when they got to Hogwarts she ended up being sorted into Gryffindor, so she assumed that things would probably work out. She'd get used to being around Harry, and eventually get over her crush. While the

students around them applauded the final selection to their house for the year, Hermione shared a smile with Harry. Another year was underway.

Hopefully it wouldn't be as dangerous as the previous one.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

(1) At the end of Book 2, Harry gives his phone number to Ron and Hermione. Ron calls him, with disastrous results, but Hermione does not. Why? Did she defer to Ron because he was Harry's 'best friend' and she wasn't? Even though Ron has never even seen a phone, much less used one, while making a phone call would have been second nature for her? Or is it just another example of JKR going for drama at the expense of plausibility? In any case, here Harry naturally exchanges phone numbers with his best friend Hermione, and she naturally calls him when she suspects something's wrong.

(2) At the end of Book 1 we learn that Hermione 'of course' was at the top of the class, and that Harry and Ron passed 'with good marks'. Here, with Harry being considerably more conscientious about his studies, a Top 10 placement seems quite reasonable. According to JKR's class list, there are 40 students in their year.

(3) They experienced all the same dangerous episodes that occurred in Book 1. Except Hermione wasn't sitting in the bathroom crying when the troll arrived. Here's what happened instead:

Hermione was reading in the library and lost track of the time. This was not an uncommon occurrence, and usually Madame Pince waited until it was past the starting time for the evening meal, then shooed her out. Neither of them, however, knew that on this particular evening there was a troll wandering the halls. When Quirrell made his announcement about the troll, Harry and Neville immediately went to fetch her. (Ron was still sulking about his poor performance in Charms, where Hermione had gotten the levitation spell on her first try, and Harry had also eventually made it work.)

They found her in a corridor, cowering in terror in an alcove behind a suit of armor while the troll tried to get at her. When Harry shouted at Neville to distract it, Neville knocked over another suit of armor and threw the helmet at the troll. Harry darted in and grabbed Hermione and ran.

Back in the common room, the other first years gathered around the three of them, eager to hear their story. Hermione was still shaking, so Lavender and Parvati took her up to their dorm to try to settle her down. There they teased her about how romantic it was that Harry had saved her life, and giggled that now she'd have to marry him someday. Hermione was embarrassed and blushed furiously, but appreciated that they were helping by taking her mind off the troll. Before this she'd had little patience for their silliness, but resolved to try to get along better with them in the future.

Meanwhile, Seamus and Dean gave Harry a hard time for thinking like a muggle instead of a wizard. Harry admitted that he'd reverted to his standard tactics he used when being threatened by his cousin (who he claimed was nearly as big as a troll), namely, duck, dodge, and run like hell.

The boys all got a laugh out of that, but Seamus claimed that they should have levitated the suit of armor and made the troll chase it. Dean chimed in that they could have even tried to levitate the knight's sword to attack the troll. Neville reminded them that he'd not been able to make the levitation spell work, so throwing the helmet was his only option. That made Ron feel a bit better – he wasn't the only one who couldn't do the spell.

Later, McGonagall showed up to announce that the emergency was over and the troll had been dealt with. When she reported that it had smashed up two suits of armor in the library wing, she wondered why all her first year boys found that so funny.

(3a) I'm worried that the previous footnote is too much information for a footnote. But I can't think of anything else to do. That material just didn't fit into the flow of the chapter, but on the other hand I thought you would really want to know what happened with the troll!

(4) The Herbology trap seems tailor made for Neville. And this way each of the four friends took the lead on one of the challenges.

(5) So, the Grangers rescue Harry from Privet Drive instead of the Weasleys. Sorry, Harry, no flying car this time. Also, he doesn't get to visit the Burrow for a couple more years yet.

(6) I've made this point before, but here it is again. The most common characteristic of Susan Bones in fanfiction is that she is an orphan (closely followed by her having a larger than normal bust). Actually, neither of these is supported by canon. I tend to go along with her being well endowed, because it's fun and harmless. But it's pretty clear from Book 5 that her parents were NOT killed by Death Eaters, so I never portray her as an orphan. The HP Lexicon agrees with me on this. We are told specifically in Chapter 25 that Susan's uncle, aunt, and cousins were killed, but it says nothing about her parents. Certainly, in that context, losing her own parents would have been a considerably more significant point to make. And while earlier in the book she explicitly identifies Amelia Bones as her aunt, there's no indication given that she lives with her.

3rd year

Harry woke slowly, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he looked around the room. He'd finally got used to waking up in a guest room in the Leaky Cauldron instead of his small crowded bedroom at the Dursleys. All in all, things had turned out rather well this summer, considering how much trouble he might have found himself in.

He'd hit his breaking point with Aunt Marge, releasing a bout of accidental magic that had blown her up like a balloon. Fleeing the house, he'd stumbled onto the Knight Bus and come to Diagon Alley, where Minister Fudge had met him and promised to smooth things over. Amelia Bones had arrived soon after and went even further, declaring that the incident would be recorded as justifiable accidental magic, keeping his record clean. Fudge hadn't been too happy with that, and Harry had realized that the Minister had hoped to have Harry be in his debt.

After some deliberation, Harry had decided to spend the rest of the summer here in Diagon Alley. The Grangers were on holiday in France for a month. The Weasleys, having won some sort of wizarding sweepstakes, had packed the whole family off to Egypt to visit the oldest brother, Bill. And Harry didn't think he particularly wanted to deal with Neville's gran. Madame Bones had suggested he stay with Susan's family, but something made Harry balk at that idea. Susan was a good friend, but still had a bit of a giddy attitude around him. It might also have been his concern about Hermione's reaction to hearing that he'd spent three weeks at the pretty Hufflepuff's house.

Those thoughts reminded him that today was a special day, and his face brightened. He was planning to meet his friends (Hermione in particular, he noted as his face warmed slightly) to shop for their school supplies, something which he'd been eagerly looking forward to for a week. As he hastened to get ready for the day, his mind wandered back to the previous school year.

-oooOOOooo-

His hopes that his second year would be less eventful – or at least less dangerous – than his first had been in vain. But at least his disagreement with Hermione over Lockhart had been quickly resolved. She had become severely disillusioned with the pompous

professor after their first lesson and quiz, and any remaining respect for the man disappeared when he'd vanished the bones in Harry's arm after a quidditch mishap.

What Hermione referred to as Harry's 'corrupting influence' on her behavior had manifested itself dramatically when she'd shocked her friends by coming up with the idea to secretly make Polyjuice potion, and stolen some of the ingredients from Snape! Harry had assisted her with the actual brewing, which they'd done in an abandoned bathroom haunted by a ghost named Moaning Myrtle. (They knew better than to let Ron or Neville anywhere near a potions cauldron!) Then the three boys had impersonated Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle in order to infiltrate the Slytherin common room to find out what Malfoy knew about the attacks by the 'Heir of Slytherin', but had come up empty handed.

That whole fiasco, in which Harry himself had been suspected by many students, had been a bitter experience, although being friends with Susan Bones had at least helped out with the Hufflepuffs. This was fortunate, since one of their house members, Justin Finch-Fletchly had been the only non-Gryffindor student paralyzed. Madame Bones had visited Hogwarts to investigate each attack, but to no avail. The most positive result of her taking personal interest had been with Hagrid's case. Fudge, at Lucius Malfoy's urging, had wanted to send the oversized gamekeeper to Azkaban, but the DMLE Director had stood her ground. He would be questioned as a possible suspect, but at the Ministry, not Azkaban.

That day had been one of the worst in Harry's life. At breakfast Hermione had a sudden inspiration about what had been attacking the students, and insisted on going to the library. Harry had been unable to go with her, as he had a quidditch match to prepare for, so Neville had offered to accompany her instead. To Harry's horror, both had been attacked and petrified. He couldn't help blaming himself, at least partly. If he'd been with her, maybe he'd have heard the creature approaching? (1)

The quidditch match had been cancelled, Dumbledore had been suspended, and Hagrid taken away for questioning as a suspect. The only positive outcome of the day had been that he and Ron, while secretly witnessing Hagrid's arrest, had learned that a student had been killed the last time the Chamber had been opened. This provided another clue, and following Hermione's example, Harry had

dragged Ron to the library for research, where they had discovered that the victim was none other than Moaning Myrtle (2)

Over the course of the next week Harry had visited his petrified friends in the infirmary every day. When no one else was around he'd sit by Hermione's bedside and hold her hand, unknowingly repeating her actions of the previous year, pleading silently that she'd recover and come back to him. It was only in her absence that he fully comprehended how much he'd come to rely on her, how much she truly meant to him.

And the first time he'd taken her left hand instead of her right he'd discovered the torn out page she'd been clutching when she'd been attacked by the very monster whose identity she'd just determined. A basilisk.

He'd hurried to see McGonagall, the acting Headmistress, but she was skeptical of her students' conclusion. For one thing, a basilisk killed its prey, rather than petrify them. And she couldn't imagine how such a large creature could move through the castle undetected.

It took several more visits to Hermione's bedside, where Harry would engage in one-sided brainstorming sessions with his silent friend, before he put all the pieces together. Basilisk – large snake – Parseltongue – pipes – plumbing – bathroom – Moaning Myrtle's toilet!

At that point he ran out of time. Ginny Weasley had been taken into the Chamber of Secrets.

Acting quickly, with no time to think about a plan, Harry and Ron had grabbed Lockhart and entered the Chamber. Lockhart had turned on them and obliviated Ron, but Harry, who had been practicing spells with Hermione on their own ever since that first disastrous Defense class, disarmed and knocked out their incompetent professor before he could cast a second Obliviate. (3)

A half hour later, with help from Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, and a lot of luck, Harry had emerged from the Chamber, greatly shaken from his near-death experience, and exhausted. After explaining what he could to the conveniently just-returned Dumbledore, he'd barely managed to make it to the hospital wing before collapsing into the bed next to the one occupied by his best friend. (4)

The hug they'd shared the next day when she'd finally been revived had dwarfed any other he'd ever received. There was no telling how long it would have gone on if Neville hadn't been watching from the next bed.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry felt himself blushing as he recalled that event, and blushed even harder when he found himself looking forward to a repeat performance with the same young witch. As a matter of fact, he noticed as he checked the time, she should be arriving any minute. No sooner had he descended to the main floor of the popular tavern than the door to Charing Cross Road opened and he spotted a familiar head of bushy hair coming through.

"Harry!" she called out, waving excitedly as the two friends hurried across the pub to greet each other. Harry took an extra moment to savor the tight hug they shared. Hermione's hugs had a markedly different feel to them than when they'd first met two years before, and Harry noticed that his body was responding in a decidedly different manner as well.

"Hermione, I've missed you," he declared softly as he buried his face into that mass of hair. As they pulled away he had the opportunity to take a closer look at her, and immediately noticed her dark tan. As she led him back to her parents, chattering excitedly about her holiday in France, he found his mind making some interesting connections between her tan and what he'd heard about French beaches. Suddenly, he was glad that the Leaky Cauldron was so dimly lit, so he wouldn't need to explain why his face was so red! Fortunately, he managed to rein in his thoughts enough to greet the elder Grangers. (5)

Mr. Granger announced that they were going to take him out into muggle London for breakfast, and Harry happily agreed. He almost didn't notice that Hermione hadn't let go of his hand when they reached the street, but once he did he gave hers a little squeeze to indicate he was fine with it.

Later, Harry would have a difficult time recalling actually eating the breakfast, although he was certain that it was delicious, because he couldn't get his mind off Hermione's tan. It didn't help that she was

wearing a tee shirt with a scooped neckline. It wasn't so low cut as to reveal any cleavage (thank goodness!) but there was plenty of skin on display. And it didn't help at all that no tan lines were visible anywhere. Or that her figure had continued to develop since the previous year.

After a while he knew that he'd shot so many quick glances at her torso that he was sure everyone at the table had noticed. He had to say something.

"Nice tan," he finally blurted out. He resolutely studied his plate for a few seconds before chancing another peek in her direction. Fortunately, she had a pleased expression on her face.

"Thanks," she responded with a shy smile. "We spent the last week at the beach, and I was out in the sun every day. I spent most of that time reading, of course," she added. That comment got a knowing chuckle from her parents, and Harry grinned at them and nodded in agreement, relieved that he seemed to have escaped everyone's disapproval for his staring. Hermione's pout and protest that she wasn't that bad escalated the chuckles to laughter.

Just as they were finishing breakfast, however, Hermione's father asked Harry if he could have a private word with him. The look of absolute terror that flashed across the young teen's face didn't go unnoticed by the others, and mother and daughter shot each other smiles of amusement as the two males stood up and moved away from the table.

Harry's fears proved groundless, though, because what the older man had in mind was a financial deal. He explained that Gringotts would give him 10 Galleons in exchange for 100 Pounds Sterling, but when exchanging in the other direction, as when Harry needed muggle money, the rate was 100 Pounds for 20 Galleons. He suggested they split the difference, and Harry readily agreed, accepting 200 Pounds from Mr. Granger in return for 30 Galleons, which would be more than enough for Hermione's supplies for the year. Mrs. Granger then asked if he needed anything from London, and Harry decided to spend part of his newly acquired cash to replace his worn out and frequently repaired trainers. Forty Pounds later he had his first ever pair of new shoes. (6)

The Grangers bid them farewell and the two teens reentered the Wizarding world. Once again they held hands as they traveled from shop to shop, while Harry pointed out some of the places he'd explored during the past few weeks. Hermione allowed him to show her the new Firebolt in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies, and Harry patiently waited while she purchased additional books beyond what was on their school list at Flourish and Blotts. He reflected with considerable relief that it was a far more pleasant experience than they'd had in that bookstore the previous year.

"Harry?" Hermione asked hesitantly as they finally exited the bookstore. "Did you get a permission slip for Hogsmeade?" Harry scowled and shook his head.

"No," he admitted glumly. "Uncle Vernon said he'd sign it if I made it through Aunt Marge's visit without causing any trouble, but you already know how that turned out."

Hermione's shoulders slumped noticeably. Left unspoken was the fact that the Hogsmeade visits were obvious dating opportunities for Hogwarts students, and both of them had been secretly hoping to take advantage of that opportunity with the other.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Hermione responded consolingly, letting some of her own disappointment show. "It would have been a fun thing to do together."

Harry shrugged and gave a look that showed he appreciated her concern. Hermione paused, then took on an air of resolve and drew a deep breath.

"All right then, I won't go either," she declared. "I'll stay behind with you so you'll not feel left out." But Harry was shaking his head even before she'd finished, absolutely refusing to hear of it.

"Well, OK," she relented, then vowed, "But I'm going to bring you back a treat of some sort each time."

This time Harry grinned. "Does that include pranking supplies from Zonko's?" he asked impishly. Hermione's only response was to sigh and roll her eyes in mock disapproval. This made Harry laugh out loud, and Hermione joined in, their disappointment set aside for the time being.

The two of them went to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour for lunch, and Harry introduced Hermione to the owner, who'd been helping him with his homework (and provided him with free sundaes!). As they finished their dessert Harry was puzzled at the smug expression on Hermione's face. (It was only years later that he realized its significance. One day when Hermione was asked by her daughter to tell about her first ever date, she replied while shooting that same smug look at Harry that a nice boy had taken her out for ice cream.)

After lunch Ron and his family showed up, and Harry and Hermione were introduced to his parents. While Harry had more or less met them the previous school year after he'd rescued Ginny, things had been too chaotic for a proper introduction, and Hermione had been lying petrified in the Hospital Wing at the time. Harry suffered awkwardly through a tearful hug from Mrs. Weasley while Mr. Weasley vigorously shook his hand, both of them repeatedly expressing their gratitude for his heroic action. Behind them Ginny blushed, unable to meet his eyes, looking thoroughly embarrassed.

The twins eventually broke up the maudlin moment in their typical overly exaggerated style, greeting Harry like a deity, and bowing before him. "All hail the great and mighty Harry Potter!" Fred proclaimed. "Have mercy on us mere mortals," George added.

Ron rolled his eyes with annoyance and pushed them away, then grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him off to one of the shops, with Hermione following along behind, trying to keep a straight face. The three friends spent the rest of the day together, and Ron filled them in on his trip to Egypt. When he finished, they headed to Magical Menagerie, where Hermione hoped to buy a pet with her birthday money.

To Ron's dismay, she fell in love with an enormous ginger cat with thick, fluffy fur, which took an immediate dislike to Ron's pet rat Scabbers. Harry promptly had a bad feeling about how that might play out over the course of the year, but he could never have imagined all the animosity that would develop from that ominous beginning.

-ooo-

That evening the Weasleys insisted on treating Harry and Hermione to dinner. Harry smiled as he looked around the table at the near chaos that he learned was characteristic of a Weasley family meal.

On his right, Ron was earnestly reviewing the performance statistics of the new Firebolt racing broom, and its potential impact on the upcoming quidditch season. On his left Hermione was engaged in a polite conversation with Percy, listening to him describe his duties as a Head Boy. Harry had to fight back a snort at that – he knew that Hermione had probably set her sights on being Head Girl already back in her first year. He also knew that she was the only one at the table who had the patience to listen to Percy for any length of time. He actually admired her for that, although he could tell from the way she'd begun to fidget that she'd about reached her limit. Across from him Fred and George were murmuring to each other while shooting surreptitious glances at their older brother – planning their next prank on him, no doubt.

His smile faded when his gaze reached the youngest person present, Ron's sister Ginny, sitting at the opposite end of the table on the other side of her mother. She had always been shy around Harry, usually ducking her head and mumbling before running away, and her crush had only become worse when he'd saved her life. But now he caught her staring at him dejectedly, appearing to be quite miserable. Harry quickly turned away and caught Hermione's eye. She too had seen Ginny's expression, and she nodded to Harry that she understood. As they finished their meal she quietly excused herself to go and have a heart to heart talk with the smitten young girl.

-ooo-

The next morning Harry pulled Hermione aside as they waited for the Weasleys to finish getting ready. (Despite being told to get everything ready the night before, Ron was still packing.)

"I need to tell you something I overheard last night," he began urgently. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were arguing about whether to tell me this – you know how Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban?" Hermione nodded, her eyes wide with alarm. "Well, Mr. Weasley is convinced that he's after me!" Harry continued. "That's why he escaped. Mr. Weasley wanted to warn me but Mrs. Weasley wanted

to keep it quiet." Hermione turned pale as she contemplated the implications of this information.

"Don't worry, Hermione, he won't be able to get to me at Hogwarts," Harry tried to reassure her. Hermione shot him a skeptical look.

"Right. It's not like anything dangerous ever happens to you there," she pointed out sarcastically. He shrugged and she sighed. "Well, at least promise that you won't do anything to make it easier for him to find you."

Harry promised, but added. "I don't look for trouble, it usually finds me by itself."

On the train they found Neville, and they all settled into a compartment which contained a man asleep against the window. Hermione promptly noted that he was a new professor, from the name on his suitcase, and deduced that he would be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. Realizing her thought process, Harry nodded his agreement.

"Well," she said, sitting next to Harry on the seat opposite the man, "at least we should be safe until we get to Hogsmeade. It's not likely that anyone could come aboard the train during the trip, and if something does happen, we've got him to protect us."

Harry nodded, but wasn't much relieved. He couldn't help wondering to himself what might go wrong this year.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

(1) Loyal Neville naturally would have accompanied Hermione to the library, for safety's sake. After all, something was wandering around the corridors petrifying people! Consequently, he was with Hermione when she was petrified, rather than Penelope Clearwater. Why didn't Ron do the same in Book 2? Oh, right, there was a quidditch match. Harry would have to be there early for prematch preparations but Ron? Are you kidding? It's quidditch!

(2) Two years of Hermione's influence paid off, as he sensibly headed to the library for answers rather than do something impulsive and foolish like follow spiders into the Forbidden Forest!

Good thing, because there was no enchanted car there to rescue them.

(3) Since Ron was obliviated, he woke up later with no memory of the chamber. But since no spells were cast with a broken wand (no flying car crash, no broken wand), there was no rockslide that needed to be cleared. Of course, Lockhart didn't lose his memory, but not everything can be perfect. Dumbledore did terminate his employment at Hogwarts.

(4) For the record, he also managed to free Dobby and get Lucius Malfoy sacked from the Board of Governors. But after the ordeal he went through, is it realistic that he would be up to partying all night long, like they did in the book? I think he would have been completely wiped out.

(5) Hermione was described in Book 3 as looking 'very brown' when Harry met her and Ron in Diagon Alley. I interpret that to mean she picked up a dark tan on her holiday to France. (Ron, by contrast, was described as 'incredibly freckly', presumably from his exposure to the Egyptian sun.)

(6) The 'official' Galleons – Pounds conversion is 5 Pounds per Galleon. Several fanfic authors have questioned this. Here is the data I can find:

In Book 1, Harry pays 7 Galleons for his wand. Given how essential wands are, they must be pretty valuable. Worth more than 35 Pounds?

In Book 2, Mrs. Weasley takes 1 Galleon and a pile of Sickles from her vault to buy all of her children's school supplies. A Galleon would seem to be worth a lot more than 5 Pounds! (And did Ollivander have a markdown wand rack, or did Ginny use a hand-me-down wand like Ron did?)

In Book 3, Hermione notes that she has 10 Galleons left over after her school shopping to buy a birthday present. So she has almost ten times as much left over as Mrs. Weasley had to start with? (She buys a cat. Wow, that's a pretty expensive cat, even if it is a half-Kneazle! At 5 Pounds per Galleon, 50 Pounds might not be too unreasonable in the muggle world for a mixed breed cat, but we're given the impression that the storeowner was happy to get rid of it.)

Conclusion? Either a cat is worth more than a wand or the data is too inconsistent to make any meaningful determination. (This usually happens any time JKR does something with numbers.)

So bottom line, I decided to mostly go with the commonly used exchange rate, but I put an exorbitant differential in the two conversions. Seems like something goblins would do.

4th year

Harry sat impatiently in the living room of Number 4 Privet Drive, his excitement mounting. This was his last day at his aunt and uncle's house for the year – in just a few minutes the Grangers were going to pick him up on their way to the Burrow in Ottery St. Catchpole. There he and Hermione would join the Weasley family to attend the Quidditch World Cup final. He wasn't sure how Mr. Weasley had obtained all the tickets, but he was thrilled at the opportunity to see the best players in the world in action at his favorite sport. He shook his head with a wry grin on his face as he thought about the girl whose parents were providing his transportation. She was by no means a quidditch fanatic like he and the Weasleys were, but he hoped she'd enjoy the match nevertheless. After all, she always came to Gryffindor's matches at Hogwarts.

As he looked around the pristine furnishings of the room he was in, he let out a sigh of relief that it was the Grangers who would be coming to get him instead of the Weasleys. He could only imagine how much chaos that encounter might cause. The Weasley family's idea of 'normal' modes of transportation – floo, apparition, even the flying car he'd heard about – would not sit well with his uptight relatives.

At least this summer had been more tolerable than the previous ones. He'd not been locked in his room and forbidden access to his school things. There'd been no acrimonious encounter with Aunt Marge, as the disagreeable woman had avoided visiting the house while he'd been in residence. It seemed that a brief mention of his godfather – the notorious escaped prisoner who'd been serving a life sentence for murder – had thoroughly cowed his relatives. Harry had somehow neglected to add the little detail of the man's innocence.

Harry paused to reflect on that line of thought. He was coming to accept that he seemed destined to face deadly situations at Hogwarts every year. The twist for the last school year was that it turned out not to be escaped murderer Sirius Black who was the danger, as everyone had thought, it was the prison guards who were hunting him down! Harry shuddered. He detested the foul creatures known as dementors, whose very presence caused him to remember the worst time of his life – his mother pleading for her infant son's life, then being killed trying to protect him.

The memory was so traumatic that he'd passed out from the ordeal. It had happened too many times for his liking – on the train to Hogwarts at the beginning of the year, at the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff quidditch match, and finally at the end of the year. He'd had to learn the Patronus charm from Professor Lupin to be able to ward them off.

In fact, one of the few bright spots of the year had been when he'd successfully cast the charm during his second quidditch match (vs. Ravenclaw), only to learn that his Patronus had tripped up Malfoy and his sidekicks attempting to distract him. Thinking of bright spots, another big plus for the year had been meeting two of his parents' best friends!

But his last encounter with the dementors had been the worst by far. A large swarm of them had almost sucked out not only his soul, but also that of Hermione and Sirius. Only for the three of them to be saved at the last instant by himself and Hermione using a time turner! Bizarre!

Harry shook his head again, slipping into his reminiscing about the year prior. Hermione had been amazing with that time turner, not only that night but all year long. He was sure he'd have messed up for certain with trying to keep track of where he'd been and what he'd done, so as not to run into his previous self. But Hermione had managed splendidly, as she did in nearly everything she set her mind to.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry had picked up on the impossibility of her schedule immediately. Ron and Neville had as well, but had been put off by Hermione's assurances that she'd fixed everything with Professor McGonagall. Not so Harry, who was more attuned to his best friend.

When they'd selected their electives, Harry had signed up for Arithmency at Hermione's urging, Divination to placate Ron, and Care of Magical Creatures because of Hagrid's influence. Actually, every Gryffindor had selected that class, although they'd later come to have second thoughts about the choice. Hagrid was subsequently elevated to professor status, and ended up teaching the course, and his ideas on 'interesting' creatures had not always been appreciated by the students.

Hermione, however, had signed up for every elective, and there simply weren't enough hours in the day to fit everything in. Hence the time turner. Harry had promptly sussed it out when Hermione had both Muggle Studies and Arithmency scheduled at the same time. Since he was in Arithmency with her (they were the only two Gryffindors taking the difficult course) he knew she was physically present for that class period. A quick inquiry with Susan Bones, who was taking Muggle Studies, confirmed that she was simultaneously present in that classroom as well. (1)

When he confronted her about the duplicity, she swore him to secrecy. He agreed, but only on the condition that she also use the device every day to rest for an hour or two, preferably taking a nap. He was now convinced that this had made the year much less stressful for her.

Divination had turned out to be a big mistake, which Harry realized from the very first period. Professor Trelawny, for some reason, had taken a personal interest in him. While this might be a good thing in some classes, in Divination it resulted in her constantly predicting his demise. His life was difficult enough with real threats to his well being, he didn't need to constantly hear fanciful ones from that batty old fraud. He had decided to drop the course at the end of the year. Hermione hadn't even made it that far. She'd walked out in the middle of a class after one final nasty disagreement over yet another prediction of doom for Harry.

That particular course, unpleasant though it might be, was far from the worst aspect of the year. That honor went, of course, to the Dementors. Another candidate was the trial of the hippogriff Buckbeak, which resulted in the order for the proud but dangerous creature to be executed, despite Hermione's exhaustive efforts on his behalf. And finally, on a more personal level, there was the misunderstanding about the Firebolt.

Harry had been quite miffed with Hermione for going to McGonagall about the mysterious present, resulting in it being confiscated. In his ire, he'd avoided her for a week. That ended abruptly when Neville, of all people, dragged them both into an empty classroom and demanded that they sort it out, pointing out that the two of them were too good of friends to let something like this break them apart. (Harry noted to himself that he owed Neville big time for that.) (2)

Harry had grudgingly agreed with that sentiment; friendship was probably more important than a broomstick. Hermione had flung her arms around his neck and burst into tears. She'd apologized for going behind his back, and he'd conceded the possibility that the broom might have been tampered with. Inwardly, he recognized that this was one of Hermione's flaws – she occasionally got an idea in her head that she was certain she was right about, and became rather single-minded in following through with it, without always considering all the consequences. It was something that he would just have to deal with if he wanted to be her friend. And he very much wanted that.

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Harry frowned. Things had not worked out so well with Ron. The redhead had oddly seemed to take the Firebolt incident even more personally than he had. When he'd learned that Harry had reconciled with Hermione, Ron hadn't been happy at all, going so far as accusing him of betrayal. Belatedly, Harry had wondered if Ron saw this crack in his and Hermione's relationship as an opportunity for him to get closer to Harry. The breaking point had come with the disappearance of Ron's rat, which the hotheaded boy had immediately blamed on Hermione's cat, which he'd never liked. Ron had not spoken to either of them for the rest of the school year.

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By the end of the year they had figured out part of the mystery of Sirius Black, but didn't put it all together until that fateful night. In hindsight, the chain of events actually began during Harry's Divination final, when Professor Trelawny temporarily went into a trance and made an actual prediction – something about a servant returning to his master. Later, as Harry and Hermione were preparing to go out to Hagrid's for Buckbeak's appeal, Harry was checking the Marauder's Map when he noticed the presence of Peter Pettigrew in Hagrid's hut. That had led to a chase across the Hogwarts grounds involving the rat, Crookshanks, and the large black dog (who they'd spotted lurking around the castle for months) that ended up under the Whomping Willow and finally in the Shrieking Shack.

There they finally sorted everything out – the dog was in fact Sirius Black, the rat, Scabbers, was actually Pettigrew, and Pettigrew, not Black was the secret keeper who'd betrayed the Potters to their deaths. Unfortunately, just as the whole situation seemed under control and the danger past, they'd been set upon by a horde of Dementors while returning to the castle. (3)

That was where the entire sequence got confusing, but Pettigrew had escaped, with Crookshanks chasing after him, while Harry, Hermione, and Sirius had collapsed from the overwhelming mental pressure of the sheer numbers of the foul, soul-sucking creatures. When Harry and Hermione had awoken later in the Hospital Wing, they learned that Sirius was about to be Kissed. Following a hint by Dumbledore, the pair had used the time turner to rescue not only Sirius but also Buckbeak, as well as saving their previous selves with Harry's Patronus.

Besides the look of amazement and gratitude on Sirius's face at the window as he realized he was going to be rescued, there were two other enduring memories of that evening. First, how his heart skipped a beat when Hermione pulled him close in order to loop the chain of the time turner around both their necks, briefly brushing her cheek against his. (4) And second, how it felt to ride Buckbeak with Hermione snuggled up behind him holding tight for dear life. Harry wanted more than anything to experience those feelings again.

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As he finished reminiscing and looked out the window again, he wondered if he'd be able to work up the nerve to ask her out this year. He hoped so. With his signed permission slip from Sirius in hand, he was really looking forward to possible dates with her on Hogsmeade weekends.

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On the drive to Harry's house, Hermione sat up straight in the back seat watching out the window, focusing intently on the street signs and other possible landmarks. They had made this trip two years before, and she wanted to determine how well she remembered it. More importantly, there was a good chance she might be making this drive herself in a couple of years, and wanted to be sure she could find her way. As an added bonus, her concentration on this

task helped keep her mind occupied, reducing that chance that she'd hyperventilate with the excitement at seeing Harry again. Not that she was obsessed or anything, she insisted to herself.

For probably the hundredth time that summer, she vowed again that she would work to control those aspects of her personality where she tended to go overboard – her obsession with her schoolwork and her tendency to stubbornly insist on the rightness of her positions. Not that there was anything wrong with being dedicated to her studies or in having strong convictions, she just needed to do better at keeping things in perspective. She knew she had these problems, and her parents had tried their best to help her control them, but they still persisted, manifesting themselves most strongly when she was feeling insecure about herself. The previous academic year was a perfect example of how these tendencies got her into trouble.

Despite advice to the contrary from her parents and Professor McGonagall, she'd insisted on taking every elective course Hogwarts offered, which ended up requiring a time turner to fit everything into her schedule. She still didn't know how McGonagall had managed to obtain one of the rare devices for her. She was glad now that Harry had found out about it and made her ease up a bit. The thought that he was looking out for her like that warmed her heart and brought a smile to her face. She knew that left on her own that she would have overdone it, not bothering to take rest breaks, and burned herself out by the end of the year. This year she would do better, she told herself firmly; she'd dropped Muggle Studies as well as Divination, so now she'd have a more realistic course load.

Her smile faded as she recalled another consequence of her obsessiveness and her stubbornness about being right – the misunderstanding about Harry's Firebolt. It seemed that something different came between them each year that ended up in a quarrel. She had been proven right about the broom being sent by Sirius Black, but now realized she had gone about it entirely the wrong way. She'd decided that she knew best without taking Harry's point of view into consideration, or worse, even bothering to consult him at all! She firmly resolved to communicate better this year, and try not to always insist on her point of view.

At least she'd had good intentions. Her actions, of course, had been entirely motivated by her concern for Harry's well-being (and not

jealousy over Harry's getting a nicer present than her, which was Ron Weasley's ridiculous claim). She recalled how her heart had been in her mouth when Harry fell from his broom when dementors showed up during his first quidditch match. And she so admired his determination to learn the difficult Patronus charm to defend against the foul creatures. She'd joined with him in learning it in a show of support, but had been amazed when he'd mastered it first. Usually she was the first one to learn a new spell in class.

She shivered as she remembered trying to cast the charm when they were surrounded by the dementors on the shore of the lake. When their spells had fizzled and faded out she was certain they were about to lose their souls. But then she'd awakened in the Hospital Wing and an already incredible adventure had turned into the most extraordinary night of her life!

It had culminated with Harry and her riding Buckbeak up to Flitwick's window to rescue Sirius. Hermione had initially been extremely apprehensive at the idea of flying on the back of the hippogriff, and had wrapped her arms around Harry's waist, squeezing him tighter than she ever had. She wondered if he had noticed; he hadn't mentioned anything at the time, of course, given the circumstances. She remembered the feeling as if had happened only yesterday. Holding him so intimately had calmed her down, and by the time they'd reached the window she'd been able to function normally, using her wand to unlock it and let Sirius out. Then he'd climbed on behind her, sandwiching her between himself and Harry. That had made her scoot up even tighter against her best friend. And even though it was no longer necessary for her to hold onto him as tightly, she hadn't loosened her grip in the slightest. And then they landed on the roof and Sirius and Buckbeak flew off into the night, while she and Harry raced back to the Hospital Wing before they were discovered.

As Hermione pondered that narrow escape her thoughts were redirected to the present, wondering what danger might be in store for them this year. She would have to get Harry to tell her more about those disturbing dreams with Pettigrew and Voldemort in them. They sounded quite ominous. She would make certain that he kept Dumbledore informed about them. They had to stop trying to solve every mystery on their own!

"Are you all right dear?" Hermione jumped a bit, startled by her mother's voice. Her parents shared a concerned glance, having noticed how worked up their daughter was getting, and decided a conversation to distract her might be in order.

"So, tell me again about quidditch," her father suggested. "You said it was like football played on broomsticks?"

"Something like that," Hermione replied. "Except there are three different kinds of balls. The keeper's really the only position that's nearly the same in both sports." She went on to explain about the three hoops that were the equivalent of the goal, the quaffle, and the chasers. Then she described the bludger and the beaters, causing her parents to wince at the thought of being struck by an iron ball traveling at a high rate of speed. She finished with the seeker and the golden snitch.

"So the game isn't timed at all, it simply ends when the seeker catches the snitch?" her father asked by way of clarification. "That must make the seeker a pretty important position."

"Yes, that's true," Hermione agreed. "The seeker often determines the outcome of the match, at least in the games I've seen at Hogwarts. I'm not sure if that's also the case on the professional level."

"And Harry plays seeker?" This question came from her mother, who smiled inwardly as her daughter's face brightened at the mention of her best friend (or perhaps more?).

"Oh yes, and he's very good at it," Hermione answered enthusiastically. "The best at Hogwarts for certain. He was picked for the team in his first year, which hadn't happened for more than 100 years previously. I suppose he's not on the same level as what we'll be seeing at the World Cup, although people say he's better than Charlie Weasley, and he supposedly could have played for England's national team." She paused, realizing that she was beginning to ramble on a bit. She blushed lightly – that seemed to happen more often when she was talking about Harry.

Her father was struggling to keep a grin off his face. "You were never that much of a sports fan before you went to Hogwarts," he teased.

"Well, I go to all of Harry's ... I mean, Gryffindor's games," she hastened to explain, her blush deepening. "But not any of the others. Harry goes to all the games at Hogwarts. So do Ron and his brothers." A brief frown flashed across her face at the mention of the Weasleys. She and the youngest Weasley male had had a bitter falling out during the school year, and while they'd reconciled once he'd learned the truth about his rat, some things were said that were not easily forgotten. (5) On the other hand, she was still friends with Ginny, and Harry was still close to Fred and George, so she hoped it wouldn't be too awkward at the Burrow and the World Cup.

Up in the front seat, her parents shared a knowing look at her slip of the tongue regarding her true reason for attending quidditch matches. Their fourteen-year-old daughter was definitely smitten with the boy they were about to meet again.

"And who did you say was playing in this World Cup?" her father asked. Hermione frowned as she tried to remember. Surely one of the letters she'd exchanged with Harry or Ginny must have mentioned which countries had made the final? She mentally scanned the contents of each letter until she came up with the information.

"Ireland ... and Bulgaria," she announced, pleased that her prodigious memory had come through again. Only to have her triumph tarnished when she noticed her father's smirk in the rear view mirror. He'd been having a go at her!

She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, turning to stare out the window again, avoiding his gaze. Honestly, what difference did it make who was playing in the match? It wasn't as if she knew any of the players. Or that she was likely to ever meet one of them, much less make their acquaintance.

By now they had arrived in Surrey, and were entering the village of Little Whinging. Minutes later they pulled into the driveway of Harry's aunt and uncle's house, and Hermione thought she was going to burst with excitement. Harry's face appeared at the front door, and he waved eagerly before turning to get his trunk.

"Hermione." She turned as her mother's hand rested on her shoulder, restraining her briefly. "Remember, you're not twelve

anymore." Hermione glanced down at herself. That was certainly true. At twelve her body had just been starting to develop; now, a month shy of her fifteenth birthday she was nearly fully grown into her adult figure. And what she was wearing today made that fact quite evident.

But she understood what her mother was getting at. She needed to act like a young lady, rather than the enthusiastic girl who'd raced up and jumped into a hug with her friend, nearly knocking him over in her excitement. She took a breath and composed herself, then stood up straight (shoulders back, chest held high) and walked briskly to the door, even managing to work a bit of sway into her hips along the way.

Harry looked up as he wrestled his trunk to the bottom of the front steps and his mouth went dry. Striding toward him was his best friend and she ... was ... Hot! There was no other word to describe her. She was wearing a snug fitting, pale blue, spaghetti-strapped tank top that left her upper back and shoulders almost completely bare, combined with a tight pair of short white shorts. Truth be told, she was dressed exactly the same way thousands of other teenaged English girls were that warm, August day. But this wasn't just any girl, this was Hermione! It was the most skin he'd ever seen her reveal. It also occurred to him that Mrs. Weasley would have a fit when she saw the outfit.

Hermione maintained her calm exterior even as her heart was pounding, by carefully studying Harry's reaction and the expressions that crossed his face. Amazement, then delight, then admiration, then worry. She puzzled a moment over the last one, but then she figured it out and shot him a reassuring smile. She had that problem covered.

Harry regained his composure by the time she reached him and he opened his arms in welcome. During the tight hug that followed he whispered into her ear.

"You look really good. And thanks for coming to get me."

"Thanks. And believe me, it's my pleasure. I've missed you," she whispered back, hiding her blush in his shoulder.

"Me too," he agreed, holding onto the hug a bit longer.

Then, noticing the looks her mother and father were giving them, he released her and stepped back. As he took the handle of his trunk, Hermione picked up Hedwig's cage, then joined her other hand with his. Exchanging shy smiles, and keeping their hands clasped, they made their way with their loads to the back of the car, where Mr. Granger had opened the boot.

Together the two of them wrestled the trunk into place while Hermione's father exchanged brief greetings with Harry's uncle, and her mother had a few words with his aunt. On the surface they were simple pleasantries - yes, it certainly was a hot summer, and yes, they were happy to take Harry with them to Devon, and no, it was no trouble as it was practically on their way, and yes, it was better that the Weasleys didn't come fetch him themselves. But there was an underlying message that was clearly communicated by the Grangers to the Dursleys. We're still paying attention to what's happening here. This summer went fine, but it better continue that way next year too. After they'd established that, they joined the teens in the car.

The drive to Ottery St. Catchpole began with greetings and polite inquiries. What had everyone been doing so far this summer? The responses varied: did his homework, but not much else to talk about – Harry; interesting stories about dental patients – Mr. and Mrs. Granger; describing a few outings and several books she'd read – Hermione; and some tales of another Granger family summer trip to France. This time they'd focused on the cities, cathedrals, and museums.

After about an hour of this, Hermione's father moved the conversation back to Harry by soliciting his views on the Quidditch World Cup the two teens were about to attend.

"It's going to be brilliant!" Harry enthused, his face lighting up. "Ireland has one of the best chaser lines ever put together on a national team, and Bulgaria has a young seeker who's supposed to be the best in the world." He went on for some time explaining the importance of teamwork in the goal scoring portion of the sport, where players needed to anticipate each other's actions. Then he described the more individualistic position of seeker, and some of the advanced maneuvers that he'd read about and hoped to observe.

"Hermione tells us that you're a pretty good seeker yourself," Mr. Granger noted. Harry ducked his head and his face reddened slightly. He shot a glance over at Hermione, who nodded encouragingly, then turned back to reply and shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess," he conceded with some embarrassment. "I do all right at Hogwarts. But I've only been playing for three years." The adults nodded at his answer, impressed with his modesty and truthfulness.

Hermione had been listening patiently for quite some time, taking delight in Harry's obvious excitement. But now she decided it was a good time to jump into the discussion to point out some of the other benefits of attending this event of global importance (and help her friend out).

"But it's more than just a quidditch match," she reminded them. "It's also an opportunity to meet wizards and witches from all over the world. More than 100,000 are expected to attend! Can you imagine how much we can learn?" Harry turned to her with a surprised expression; he'd obviously never considered that aspect. He shrugged an acknowledgement, but his eyes also showed his appreciation to her for her intervention. Up in the front seat, the adult Grangers managed to hide their amusement, well aware of everything that had just transpired.

Mrs. Granger had been biding her time, waiting for the opportunity to broach another subject. The silence that ended the quidditch conversation presented a perfect opening.

"Did you pick out a nice set of dress robes, Harry?" she inquired. "We had an enjoyable time selecting ones for Hermione. I wonder what formal occasion you'll be attending this year that will require them. Perhaps a dinner of some sort?"

Hermione sat up straight when she heard her mother's question, nervous about where she was going with it. She shot a hopeful glance at Harry, but he didn't pick up on it.

Harry rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably. "No, I really didn't have any chance to do anything like that. I don't get out much during the summer, you know."

"Well, you'll have to be sure to do that before you go back to school," Mrs. Granger persisted. "Hermione's are simply lovely. You should try to find something to match hers."

The girl in question was now mortified at her mother's blatant suggestion. When she was sure Harry wasn't looking, she shot her a glare that every mother of a teenaged daughter would recognize the meaning of. Mum! You're embarrassing me!

Harry was still oblivious. "I think Mrs. Weasley is going to get some for me while we're at the World Cup," he offered.

But that didn't seem to make Hermione's mum very happy. In fact, the atmosphere in the car seemed to cool considerably after that. Mrs. Granger had a frown on her face. Hermione was staring out her window, avoiding his gaze. Harry tried to catch the eye of Mr. Granger in the rear view mirror, but his expression was impassive.

He leaned back in his seat, reviewing the previous conversation, wondering what he'd said wrong. As they were nearing their destination (the Burrow sat on the outskirts of a small village) he finally figured it out. She was hinting that he should ask Hermione to be his date!

Harry let out a long sigh, wondering what his next move should be. He certainly agreed that it was a good idea, he just didn't know how to go about it.

When Mr. Granger stopped the car at the end of the lane that led to the ramshackle house (which was the strangest looking structure any of them had ever seen), Hermione removed some things from her bag. To his surprise, she stood up outside the car, on the side opposite the house, and began to put on more clothing! First she added a short sleeved, lightweight jumper. It was royal blue, and nicely matched her light blue tank top, which was still visible under the V neckline of the jumper. Then over her white shorts she pulled on a long skirt, with a blue floral print. Harry was impressed.

Hermione noticed his rapt attention. "How do I look?" she asked with a smile, twirling to make her skirt flare out.

"Great!" he blurted out. Then he worried that he was being overly enthusiastic. "I mean, uh ...you looked really good before, but this is

... this is really good too." He winced at how lame that sounded, but Hermione evidently didn't think so.

She stepped up to him and beamed. "Thank you. You're sweet." Then she leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. When his eyes widened she looked away quickly, but then shot him a shy glance back.

Harry took a deep breath, deciding that this was the moment. "Erm ... Hermione. You know, this formal thing your mum mentioned. I ... I was thinking. Well, maybe we'll need partners, or something like that. Do you ... um, think you might want to go with me?"

Hermione's face broke into a dazzling smile. She nodded quickly, not trusting her voice for a moment. She could feel her heart racing, and inside her mind was screaming, Yes!

Behind her, her mother was frozen on the spot, scarcely daring to breathe. Meanwhile her father was grinning as he unloaded their trunks from the back of the car. But neither of the teens noticed; right now their world was just the two of them.

Hermione took his hand and looked into his eyes. "I'd really like that. It would be wonderful."

Harry gestured to her outfit. "You look so good in that, and the way your mum was going on about your dress robes, I figured I should ask before anyone else does. I'm sure the other guys will be falling all over themselves when they see you." He was still a bit nervous, and felt the need for an explanation of the long-range invitation.

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head, but her smile grew even broader. "Oh honestly Harry, it'd be more likely the other way round," she protested. "All the girls will be asking you."

Harry grimaced, but only briefly. He was in too good a mood right now. "Won't matter if they do," he declared. "I've already got a date with the prettiest girl there." Hermione couldn't resist. She just had to hug him again for that.

Harry figured that everything was going so well, he might as well press on. "Well, besides that, maybe you'd want to go with me for anything else that happens this year?" he asked hopefully.

Hermione leaned back and regarded him quizzically, then grinned. "You mean like Hogsmeade visits?" she suggested. Harry nodded eagerly. "Like a regular series of dates?" she continued. He nodded again. Hermione took a deep breath. "Like boyfriend and girlfriend?" she concluded in a near whisper. Harry's final nod was interrupted by a crushing hug.

A pair of taps on their shoulders interrupted the celebratory embrace. They broke apart sheepishly as they turned to see the smiling faces of her parents.

"I'm so happy for you," her mum declared as she hugged them both. Her dad gave Hermione a hug as well, then shook hands with Harry.

"You two take care of yourselves this year," he advised. Harry nodded, understanding the several layers of meaning in that request. Then he turned back to the man's daughter and smiled again, taking her hand. They each grabbed a handle of a trunk, and arm in arm they walked happily up the path to the Burrow.

This was going to be their best year yet!

They'd worry about Harry's dreams later.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

(1) According to the book, Hermione had Divination and Muggle Studies and Arithmency all at the same time. Evidently, no one else from Gryffindor took that combination. But here, Harry also signed up for Arithmency, necessitating a schedule change. So she only has two classes simultaneously. And this Harry takes the time to confirm this fact with his friend Susan.

(2) Neville, as a good friend to both Harry and Hermione, would naturally play the role of mediator. Hagrid eventually did the same thing in the book, but Neville's closer to the scene and freer to take action, so does so much sooner than Hagrid could.

(3) Harry still had the map. Since he'd long since made up with Hermione and was no longer influenced by Ron, he didn't sneak out to Hogsmeade and throw mud at Malfoy in an incident that ended up with Remus confiscating the map. So Remus didn't come out to the

Whomping Willow and forget to take his potion. (Ron wasn't there either.) Unfortunately, the dementors still attacked them, Pettigrew still got away, and Sirius was still captured. And Snape was still so mad after Sirius's subsequent escape that he 'let slip' that Remus was a werewolf, causing his resignation. Remus was also deeply chagrined to learn that Sirius had been innocent all those years and vowed to make it up to him.

(4) I find this amusing. How long was the chain on the timeturner? Hermione wears it like a pendant, slipping it out of her robes to use it. A normal length for this would be 24 inches; 30 or 36 inches tops. A 24 inch chain wouldn't fit over two people's heads. At 36 inch chain would be quite snug, requiring the cheek to cheek contact I described. But in the POA movie, in the infirmary Hermione suddenly pulls out a chain that must be at least six feet long! There's no way she could have been using it like that all year. (And, in fact, it's normal sized just a few minutes later when she takes it out of her shirt again to explain it to Harry.) I can only assume that the moviemakers wanted to avoid the cozy scene shown here. Tough luck Dan!

(5) Yes, it took quite some time for Ron to be persuaded of the secret identity of his rat. It involved Harry practically swearing a magical oath, Fred and George suggesting that he would make a good test subject for pranks, and Ginny threatening him with a Bat Bogey hex.

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A/N When I originally conceived this story, I planned to end it here. The whole idea was to show how Harry and Hermione progressed from that first meeting to becoming boyfriend and girlfriend. Then I realized that nothing much had actually happened yet! The big changes to the larger story wouldn't kick in until after they got together. So I decided I'd better add some more.

Therefore, next chapter will relate the impact of this new relationship on their lives, the events of 4th year, and indeed, the entire wizarding world.

5th year

Hermione stepped out onto the sunlit balcony and looked around, noting the comfortable lounge chairs and especially the spectacular view. Her two companions, Cho Chang and their host, Fleur Delacour, followed her and each claimed a lounge, set down their bags, and began to arrange their things. Hermione moved back from the balustrade that marked the boundary of their private sunning space, selected her own lounge chair, and followed suit.

She had to refrain from pinching herself to make certain she wasn't dreaming. She supposed that she ought to be used to this by now, with all the extraordinary things that had happened to her since her entry into the wizarding world (and especially since she'd met Harry Potter!), but this was so far beyond her previous experience as to border on the surreal.

It was simply amazing, how her life had changed since the previous summer. Back then she'd been nervous about the possibility of getting together with Harry, worrying about how she would be able to compete with all the other girls vying for his attention. Now here she was, good friends with two of the most gorgeous females she knew, and had not the slightest concern about the possibility of them stealing her boyfriend. For she and Harry were now a firmly committed couple. But that was only the personal aspect of the incredible series of events that had brought her now to this enchanting chateaux in southern France.

Where her host had just removed all of her clothing and settled down on her lounge chair to sunbathe in the nude!

Hermione shot a quick glance at the other girl present, a schoolmate from Hogwarts. Cho, a beautiful Ravenclaw a year ahead of her (who she was pretty sure Harry had fancied at one time) caught her eye, gave a small shrug, and followed their host's example. Hermione swallowed hard and then decided, 'What the heck. When in Rome ...'

She turned back to her own lounge and quickly divested herself of her remaining garments. And here she'd thought her new bikini was quite daring! Hermione was no stranger to topless sunbathing, having visited French beaches after all, but she had never had the nerve to try it herself. The closest she'd come had been to undo the

straps around her neck and tuck them into her top, so as to avoid any tan lines on her shoulders. (1) And she'd certainly never contemplated doing it totally nude. But she assumed that they were assured of complete privacy here, as it was evident that this was the norm for Fleur. The only way anyone would be able to see them would be from a broomstick. Perhaps nude sunbathing was a veela thing?

Once she was comfortably situated (or as comfortable as she could be, lying there naked alongside two other equally naked women, both of whom were far better looking than she was), she tried to relax and enjoy the experience. At least she didn't have the additional awkwardness of having to apply sunscreen to her newly exposed bits. Fleur had given both her and Cho a sunning potion, guaranteed to tan them to whatever degree they desired, without burning or aging their skin. Magic was a wonderful thing.

Closing her eyes, and reveling in the warm caress of the sun, Hermione allowed her mind to glide back over the events of the past year, which had such a profound impact not only on her and Harry's lives, but the entire wizarding world.

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The Quidditch World Cup match was everything she'd hoped it would be. Hand in hand, she and Harry had wandered the campground, taking in the sights, and accepting congratulations and teasing from their friends about their change in status with equally good humor. Not even the presence of the Malfoy family sharing the top box at the stadium with them marred their enjoyment of the day. The match itself was a thriller, with Ireland triumphing despite the snitch being caught by the talented young seeker from Bulgaria, Viktor Krum. Unfortunately, the good feeling of the event had been abruptly destroyed when a group of former Death Eaters decided to make their presence known with a spree of vandalism and the humiliating treatment of a family of muggles. This demonstration, in turn, was brought to a halt by the appearance of the Dark Mark.

But Harry and Hermione had resolved to put that unpleasantness behind them and set their sights on having a great fourth year at Hogwarts. The two Gryffindors decided to take their new relationship slowly, keeping public displays of affection to a minimum – nothing more demonstrative than handholding. There were still hugs, but

that was nothing new; Hermione had been hugging Harry since their first year. They just happened to occur more frequently now.

As far as Hermione was concerned, it started out to be the best year she'd ever had. And despite the lack of quidditch, Harry would have agreed with her. But that had lasted for exactly two months. On October 31st, Harry's name had somehow emerged from the Goblet of Fire, as the fourth champion in the Triwizard Tournament.

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Hermione rolled over onto her stomach and sighed as she folded her arms under her chin. Situations like that had the potential to bring out either the best or the worst in people. Sometimes both. Harry'd reacted badly at first, lashing out bitterly at everyone who assumed that he'd somehow managed to cheat his way into the tournament. His attitude certainly hadn't endeared him to the champions from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, Fleur Delacour and (by an interesting coincidence) the Bulgarian seeker, Viktor Krum. Their disdain for the younger Hogwarts competitor (Fleur had initially referred to him as 'zis leetle boy', a comment she would eventually sincerely apologize for) didn't fully dissipate until the First Task.

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After the original shock wore off, Harry had resigned himself to his fate, and began to consider his options. Realistically, he had no chance of winning the tournament, nor any particular desire to for that matter. He already had enough money, and certainly more fame than he wanted. Therefore, his primary, if not sole, objective was getting through the competition alive and unharmed. Unfortunately, this goal was considerably complicated with the realization that whoever had secretly entered him had not exactly had his best interests in mind. In Mad-Eye Moody's rather blunt words, "Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die."

After a lengthy discussion with Hermione, Harry and she had agreed on a strategy – perform each task only to the extent necessary to survive, and let someone else win. And furthermore, ensure that everyone knew what he was doing.

It took time, but eventually their fellow Hogwarts students began to come around. It began with Hermione and Neville's adamant

insistence in the Gryffindor common room that Harry had not entered willingly. The first to give him their support were his quidditch teammates, led by Fred and George. As far as the twins were concerned, it didn't matter if he'd put his name in or not. If he had, it was an impressive prank, if not, he'd certainly need their backing. Angelina pulled him aside and told him that if it couldn't be her, she was glad it was a fellow Gryffindor. Harry assured her that he wished it had been her. That brought her up short for a moment, but then she nodded and gave him a quick hug, followed by Alicia and Katie.

Ginny approached Harry and Hermione the next day. She'd held back initially, watching how things were playing out, then made her decision. Hermione wasn't certain if she really believed Harry, or if she saw this as an opportunity to get closer to him. Ginny was a clever girl, and would have been able to see how this could improve her standing in his eyes. Either way, they were both grateful for her endorsement and pledge to help him in any way she could.

Ron, on the other hand, had not taken this development well at all. He made it abundantly clear that he didn't believe Harry, and refused to have anything to do with his former friend. While Harry was deeply disappointed, he wasn't entirely surprised, and was glad he had several other friends he could count on.

In Hufflepuff house, Susan Bones had made an impassioned plea to her housemates that this simply wasn't something that Harry Potter would do, pointing out that for three years he'd been a reluctant hero. Most of them were skeptical at first, due both to their loyalty to their fellow Hufflepuff Cedric Diggory, and to having their innate sense of fairness shaken by the selection of a second Hogwarts champion. It was then that Cedric himself had stepped forward and acknowledged that Harry had always seemed like a straightforward, upfront kind of guy, from his times competing against him in quidditch. As a result the house decided to take a wait and see attitude toward the situation.

Their reservations would be eased over the next few weeks when Harry took every opportunity to publicly state that as far as he was concerned, Cedric was the real Hogwarts champion, and was Harry's choice to win the tournament. This stance left quite a few students shaking their heads in disbelief, but greatly diminished the

outright animosity that might have come his way. Except, of course, from the members of Slytherin house.

Harry's declared intention to participate only to the minimum extent possible was challenged the week before the First Task by Mad-Eye Moody, this year's DADA professor. With Hagrid's aid, Harry had learned that the champions were to go up against dragons. He'd promptly sought out Cedric to share the information, but Moody had overheard this and taken him aside. The gruff old Auror had pointed out acidly that the dragon wouldn't care if Harry was trying or not. If he didn't have a plan to evade the dangerous creature, he'd get fried. He then indirectly suggested that Harry consider utilizing his flying skills.

(At the end of the year, Harry and Hermione would reflect that they should have wondered why Moody was taking such an interest in Harry, and helping him so blatantly. It was quite contrary to everything they'd heard about the cantankerous old man, not to mention being completely against the rules of the tournament.)

Harry had to concede that Moody did have a point. It just so happened that they'd recently learned Summoning charms, so for the next few days Harry practiced calling his Firebolt to himself from increasingly longer distances. The day of the task he'd asked Neville and Ginny to surreptitiously place the broomstick behind Hagrid's hut, which was only a short distance from the makeshift stadium where the task was to be held, and well within his range.

It was just Harry's luck to draw the most vicious dragon, and go last. Entering the enclosure, he immediately spotted the Horntail crouching protectively over her eggs and he stood there unmoving. If he didn't make any threatening moves toward the nest, perhaps the dragon would ignore him until the time limit was up.

Wrong.

Glad he had a backup plan, Harry quickly summoned his trusty Firebolt just before the Horntail released the first blast of flames in his direction. For the next thirty minutes he soared back and forth across the enclosure and over the stands, keeping well out of its range. While he was at it he entertained the crowd with some flying stunts, but always stayed well aware of the ever-watchful eye of the

dragon mother. Finally the whistle blew, signaling that his time was up.

As he landed outside the enclosure and dismounted he was nearly bowled over by a frantic bushy-haired witch. Even though their plan had worked to perfection and he'd come through completely unscathed, she couldn't relax until he was safe.

"Harry, she gasped as she threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so proud of you! But I was so worried!" She buried her head in his chest as he whispered reassurances into her ear. The massive hug that followed went on long enough that it was quite clear to every onlooker that the two Gryffindors were an item.

Unfortunately, Viktor Krum must have missed it.

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Hermione closed her eyes and winced internally. She really hoped that eventually she and Harry would make it through a school year without a painful misunderstanding. So far that hadn't happened. This time it had centered on the Yule Ball. Fortunately, however, this one had been quickly resolved.

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When the Ball had been officially announced they'd both congratulated themselves on their cleverness in arranging their date months in advance. Hermione was convinced it was more to her advantage than his, since lots of girls would want to be the partner of the Boy Who Lived, but it was unlikely that very many boys would want to ask her. So she was shocked, and caught off guard, when it actually happened.

Hermione had noticed that Viktor Krum spent a lot of time in the Hogwarts library, and she'd been friendly to him when they spoke. After all, getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them was what the whole tournament was about, was it not? She'd no idea that he had anything else in mind until he stepped up to her table and cleared his throat ...

Still in a daze as she hurried back from the library, Hermione stumbled through the portrait hole. Seeing Harry and several of their

friends sitting in their usual corner, she ran up to them and blurted out, "Viktor just asked me to the Yule Ball!"

The entire common room went silent. Many eyes turned to Hermione in surprise, while a few others focused on Harry. For his part, Harry was in turn dismayed, and devastated. After staring at her for several seconds he dropped his head and stood up, making his way silently to the stairs.

He was halfway there before Hermione realized what was happening, and how he'd misinterpreted her astonished announcement. She made up that distance in no time and spun him around, wrapping her arms around his waist and latching on for dear life.

"You silly goose!" she declared breathlessly. "I told him no!"

The ferocious kiss that followed was the first one they'd ever shared in public, and was discussed in Gryffindor Tower for an entire week.

There was one more minor moment of tension at the Ball itself, but it turned out just fine. In fact, that festive occasion would prove to be a turning point in Hermione's life, in terms of her self-esteem and confidence in her appearance.

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As Harry watched Hermione descend the stairs from the girls' dorm he stared open-mouthed, thinking that Hermione's mum had severely understated her description of those dress robes. They were not 'simply lovely', they were positively breathtaking!

"You look amazing!" he told her as he took her arm. "I'm going to this ball with the prettiest girl at Hogwarts!" Hermione beamed at him, for once unable to think of a suitable response. She practically floated down to the Great Hall in her delight. And she promptly decided that from now on, periwinkle blue was her favorite color!

After the champions had finished their opening dance, Hermione persuaded Harry to stay on the floor for another one. As they finished that song, Viktor approached and bowed to Hermione.

"May I haf this next dance?" he inquired politely. Caught by surprise again, Hermione shot a quick glance to Harry, who was staring, stonefaced, at his Bulgarian rival.

"Ah ... not right now, thank you," she stammered, tugging Harry back toward the head table. Before they reached it, however, they were intercepted by Cedric and Cho, who had observed the brief confrontation. Resolving to do a favor for his fellow champion, Cedric whispered to Cho, who nodded. Before the pair of Gryffindors knew what was happening, Cho was whisking Hermione off to the restroom while Cedric steered Harry to an out of the way spot behind the punch bowl.

"Harry, let me give you some advice," the Hufflepuff champion confided. "You need to know how formal balls like this work." Harry nodded uneasily. It was certainly true that this was far beyond any previous experience for him. "First of all, it's a dance, and that's what you're expected to do. Lots of people are going to be dancing with each other, and you have a certain obligation to participate. More to the point, other guys are going to want to dance with Hermione, and girls are going to want to dance with you. You just need to deal with it."

A frown crossed Harry's face at the mention of another guy dancing with his girlfriend, and it quickly changed into a look of alarm at the idea of having to dance with another girl, but Cedric pressed on. "Look, it doesn't necessarily mean anything, it's just a matter of etiquette. So start thinking about how you're going to handle it. Which guys you're comfortable having her dance with, and the same for which girls you'll dance with." Harry reluctantly nodded, and Cedric continued.

"Traditionally, a guy doesn't ask the girl directly, he asks her escort first for permission, then asks the girl. Officially, the man has control over the woman for the evening. So the way Krum did it just now was a something of a slight against you."

Harry shook his head. "I can't see Hermione standing for that, being considered the property of a guy. She's pretty independent. She'd have a fit." Cedric nodded in understanding.

"Most girls nowadays feel that way," he agreed. "So what you can do is approach the guy on the side and clear it with him first. Then it

doesn't look so bad. Oh, and it's considered polite, if a guy dances with your date, you offer to dance with his. She can decline if she wants."

Harry thought that sounded better. Then he began to ponder. Neville would be an obvious guy to dance with Hermione, and he was escorting Ginny. Harry supposed he could manage a dance with her. Cedric interrupted his musing.

"So, when the girls come back from the loo, I'm going to ask Hermione to dance, OK?"

Harry stared at him for a moment, then grinned. "What? A good-looking guy like you? And the Hogwarts champion to boot? You think I'm going to let you have a go at my girl?" Cedric was startled for an instant, then grinned back.

"No, you're going to let Hermione dance with your friend, Cedric."

After sharing a chuckle with his new mate for a few moments, Harry's grin abruptly vanished. "So do I have to dance with Cho?"

Cedric regarded him quizzically. "Is that a problem?"

Harry turned red. "But she's so beautiful!"

Cedric rolled his eyes. "In case you haven't noticed, mate, so is Hermione."

Harry groaned. "Believe me, I know that. But Cho is ... well, I ..."

"You used to fancy her," Cedric finished for him. Harry nodded, chagrined.

"Don't worry about it," the Hufflepuff encouraged. "Cho's pretty, obviously, but she's also a bright girl, and she can be really nice. She won't do anything to embarrass you. And she'd like to get to know you and Hermione better. If nothing else, do it as a favor to me?"

"Yeah, I guess I can do that," Harry mumbled, hoping he wouldn't be too tongue-tied with the lovely Ravenclaw.

Meanwhile, Cho was explaining the situation to Hermione. Initially, Hermione was relieved to hear what Cedric was doing, as she wasn't sure how she should try to explain the situation to Harry herself. She didn't want to make it sound like she wanted to dance with another guy instead of him, but she did want to enjoy the dancing.

"So, Cedric is going to dance with you, while I dance with Harry," Cho concluded. A worried look flashed across Hermione's face, and caught the Chinese girl's attention. She'd thought everything was settled. "Is that all right?" she asked, puzzled.

"But ... you're so beautiful!" Hermione blurted out. She dropped her head nervously. "I guess I'm worried. I know I shouldn't be, but ..."

"You're concerned about Harry being interested in me?" Cho finished. Hermione nodded. "And drop you?" the Ravenclaw added incredulously.

"Not really," Hermione conceded. "He's not like that. But, well, I think he used to fancy you, and you're so much prettier than I am ..."

"Hermione, have you looked in a mirror?" Cho demanded. Hermione's head shot back in surprise, and Cho shook her head. "Look, has Harry told you tonight how pretty you look?" The Gryffindor girl nodded shyly. "More than once?"

Hermione smiled. "Several times, actually."

"So if Harry thinks you're attractive, what else matters?" Cho concluded. Hermione acknowledged her point, her worries beginning to fade. But the Chinese girl wasn't finished. "And in case you didn't notice, you turned quite a few heads when you showed up tonight. Did you see the looks Lavender and Parvati were giving you?" Hermione's eyes went wide as she shook her head. She'd been focusing her attention on Harry and keeping him calm, although now that she thought about it she had caught a few stunned expressions.

"They were so jealous when they saw you. As well they should be!" Cho insisted.

Hermione took a moment to regain her composure, then looked at her companion curiously. "Why are you doing all this for me?" she wondered. "I mean, I appreciate it, but I hardly know you."

"I've admired you for a couple of years now," Cho admitted, now somewhat nervous herself. Hermione's eyes widened. "You and Harry both. I was impressed at the way you handled the things that have happened to you, starting two years ago when that Heir of Slytherin nonsense sprang up. And even more last year with the dementors and everything. I'm pretty sure there was more to what happened at the end of the year than we were told. And ... I've been wanting to get to know you better."

Hermione smiled and took her hand. "I'd like that."

As Cho and Hermione returned, Harry swallowed hard and rubbed his hands on his robes nervously. Internally giving himself a pep talk, he resolved to follow Cedric's lead. He could do this. After each boy had requested a dance from the other's partner, Harry caught Hermione giving him a quick glance of concern. He nodded back to reassure her that he was OK with it.

It was nothing like dancing with Hermione. Harry was stiff as a board, almost afraid to touch his exquisite dance partner. Cho was determined to get him to relax with her. "I won't bite, you know," she teased. That loosened him up slightly, but he only managed a half smile.

"Did Hermione teach you to dance?" she tried again. Harry nodded, still focusing on his hands and feet. "You're not doing too badly," she informed him. This earned her a look of disbelief. But at least he was looking at her now. "You've not stepped on my feet yet," she grinned. This time Harry managed a chuckle.

"You know, I took advantage of you during our quidditch match last year," Cho confided after several more moments of silence. "I tried my best to distract you." Harry's eyes widened in surprise. He remembered how she'd smiled at him several times, and that she seemed to keep cutting in front of him, and that he'd frequently noticed what a cute bum she had.

"You were doing that on purpose!" he sputtered. Cho grinned unrepentantly.

"Why not?" she challenged. "You're a better flyer than me, and you had a superior broom. I needed some advantage. Win any way you can, right?" Harry grinned back, recalling the famous words of Oliver Wood – get the snitch or die trying. "Besides, you still won the match, even with those morons pretending to be dementors showing up. And that was a brilliant Patronus you conjured. It certainly showed Malfoy not to mess with you." She giggled and Harry smiled broadly at the memory.

Another thought occurred to Harry and he glanced around, then lowered his voice. "So, did you do that with Cedric too? ... or Malfoy?" he added with a tone of revulsion in his voice.

Cho rolled her eyes. "With Malfoy I didn't need to. He's never caught a snitch in his life." Harry chuckled in acknowledgement and Cho sighed, a fond smile appearing on her face as she continued her reply. "As for Cedric ... I tried to, but he's a lot better at handling girls than you." Harry snorted at the obvious truth of that statement. "It didn't work. He flirted with me before and after the match, but was all business during it. We did start dating after the last match of the year."

The ice broken, the two of them began to converse more freely. Harry admitted that he always had difficulty talking to girls, especially pretty ones, he added with a blush. Cho smiled at the compliment, then noted that he talked to Lavender and Parvati, who were both very attractive. Harry responded that he really didn't interact with them all that much, as they seemed to giggle all the time when he was around. He was glad that Cho wasn't like that. Cho nodded in acknowledgement, agreeing that a lot of girls were that way and sympathizing with his problem, suggesting that it was related to his fame. Harry told her that some girls (he didn't mention Ginny by name) were so bad that they couldn't even speak around him.

"But you don't have any problem talking with Hermione," Cho pointed out.

"No, not at all. But she's been my friend for years," Harry replied with a relaxed smile. "I can talk to her about anything." Cho nodded.

"So with a girl who's a friend you would be more comfortable talking to her about all sorts of subjects?" she concluded. Harry agreed.

"Like we are now?" she smiled slyly.

A startled look flashed across Harry's face, but then he grinned. "Yeah, like we are now."

Cho suggested that the champions switch partners again. Harry paled at the thought of dancing with Fleur, so Cho told him she'd get Cedric to dance with the breathtaking part-Veela and she would dance with her escort, Cho's quidditch teammate Roger Davies. But that meant Harry would have to let Hermione dance with Viktor Krum while he danced with the Bulgarian champion's partner.

Harry reluctantly agreed, but confessed that he didn't even know who the girl was. Cho rolled her eyes and informed him that her name was Mandy Brocklehurst, that she was a Ravenclaw in his year, that she was very smart, and that she had curly brown hair. It occurred to Harry that she bore more than a passing resemblance to Hermione, and wondered if Krum had met her in the library too.

Hermione enjoyed her dance with Cedric, and was surprised when Harry and Cho revealed their plan. Harry grinned as Cedric swallowed nervously at the thought of dancing with Fleur, and shot Hermione a short nod, holding up one finger to indicate he was OK with her dancing one dance with Krum.

While her dance with Viktor was pleasant, Harry didn't fare so well with Mandy. In an odd reversal, she was all tongue tied and flustered with him. He even tried Cho's line, "I won't bite!" but she blushed even worse. When he pointed out that she'd done fine with the world famous seeker, she blurted out, "But you're Harry Potter!" He was very glad when the song ended.

The rest of the evening passed by more quickly than Harry or Hermione would have guessed. They switched partners a few more times. Ginny was delighted to dance with Harry (keeping her composure much better than Mandy had) while Hermione danced with Neville. Since Harry had been so nice to Ginny, Hermione decided to be noble and at her suggestion, he invited Susan Bones for a turn around the dance floor and her date, Justin Finch-Fletchly, did the same with Hermione. Justin was probably the best dancer

she danced with all night. And she smiled and gave Harry's arm an appreciative squeeze when he boasted that he'd mostly been able to focus on Susan's face, glancing down only a few times at her impressive cleavage.

At that point they had decided to take a break, and took a stroll out to the enchanted gardens. They soon found themselves sitting on a bench in a secluded, and quite romantic spot. One thing led to another and they created some very fond memories for themselves.

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Hermione opened her eyes, coming back from her reminiscing. She still tingled inside when she recalled that night. She rolled onto her side and glanced over at Cho, thinking how much had changed for her. When the ball had broken up and the students had started to return to their rooms, she and Harry had found Cedric and Cho to wish them good night. When both Gryffindors had tried to express their thanks to the older couple for everything they'd done, Cho had smiled brightly and replied, "That's what friends are for."

Friends. Amazingly enough, Hermione was now friends with one of the most attractive witches in the school. A girl who, among other things, had an impossibly flat stomach. Hermione had always felt fat whenever she was in the presence of the slender Chinese girl. She strongly suspected that when Cho entered the Great Hall in her long, sleek and clingy satiny dress robes, every woman present had subconsciously sucked her stomach in. And not only that, she had an extremely cute little bum. Put her in a pair of muggle short shorts and a skinny tank top and guys would probably trip over themselves as she walked down the street!

But now Hermione, her self confidence boosted after a year of dating the most sought after guy in Hogwarts, was comfortable enough with her own body to evaluate their differences more objectively. At the moment, the petite Ravenclaw was lying on her stomach, propping herself up on her elbows. It was a very attractive pose for her, displaying her assets to their best effect. But Hermione noted that there were also a few areas where she had an advantage over Cho. She had better looking legs, she thought. Cho's were on the skinny side, while hers were nicely proportioned. And quite frankly, she was curvier than Cho. She might have a bit more tummy, but there was nothing wrong with that, and her breasts were

certainly larger than the smaller girl's. And most importantly, they were both OK with it.

Now Fleur, on the other hand, had a perfect figure. Neither of the two Hogwarts students could measure up to her. But, of course, that was to be expected, since she was part Veela. And that was OK too. She was also a friend.

Hermione turned her attention to the blonde woman. If her friendship with Cho had been unlikely, the idea of her also becoming friends with the Beauxbatons champion would have been even more unimaginable. The haughty French witch had been aloof and condescending – not to mention downright disdainful of all things English – since the moment she had arrived at Hogwarts. This attitude was one with which Hermione, unfortunately, was all too familiar, having been subjected to it all through her childhood.

Only later, after she'd got to know the Beauxbatons beauty better, did Hermione learn that much of it was a façade, a way for her to cope with all the unwanted attention she received. (Something she had in common with Harry, Hermione came to realize.) For Fleur, the attitude was largely a defense mechanism. And defense mechanisms were something Hermione understood. Over the past two years she had come to comprehend that her own bossy know-it-all behavior was exactly that.

Now Hermione focused her ruminations on that morning at the lake when it had all changed.

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The day after the Yule Ball, Cedric and Cho had invited Harry and Hermione to meet privately, where Cedric revealed the clue in the egg. An intense discussion followed, where two conclusions were soon reached. Cho and Hermione would be 'what they'd sorely miss', and sitting out the task would not be an option for Harry. Once the two girls had managed to calm the boys down, they concluded by agreeing to work together. Furthermore, they would be quite open about it, continuing Harry's position of publicly supporting Cedric.

When word of this alliance spread, Karkaroff, the Durmstrang headmaster, protested strenuously, but to no avail. There was

simply nothing in the tournament rules prohibiting the champions from helping each other. It had never come up before.

Viktor Krum would have liked to continue 'getting to know' Hermione through their encounters in the library, but his efforts were severely curtailed by this new state of affairs. He could not appear to be colluding with his competition, and she was now virtually always in the company of Harry, Cho, Cedric, or some combination thereof.

Their plans for the task gradually took shape. Neville came up with the idea of using Gillyweed when Harry was unable to master the bubblehead charm. Warming charms, locator spells, waterproof watches and compasses, and full body swimsuits completed the preparations.

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Hermione regained consciousness at the surface of the lake, and immediately looked around to get her bearings. Bobbing nearby were the dripping heads of Cho and Cedric, but not Harry!

"Don't worry, everything's fine," Cedric gasped out once he'd dispelled his bubblehead charm. "We found you in plenty of time. Harry's staying down there until Krum and Fleur show up."

Hermione nodded and began to swim to the dock where the competition officials awaited with blankets and warming charms. That course of action made sense, since Harry intended to finish last again. Ten minutes later Viktor surfaced with his hostage, and she realized that it was Mandy.

That caused her to wonder – if she'd not been dating Harry, and had accepted Viktor's offer, would she have been his hostage? It was hard to believe that one date could make you someone's most precious thing! And for that matter, it was unthinkable that she could be anyone's hostage besides Harry, or conversely, that Harry's hostage could be anyone except her. She shook her head and put that thought out of her mind as too ludicrous to devote any more time to.

At that point things turned grim. Fleur Delacour was rescued from the lake, bloodied and nearly unconscious, and without her hostage. Once revived, the French champion was distraught. The composed,

aloof Veela was gone, replaced by a frantic, frightened young woman. Repeatedly, she attempted to return to the water, despite her injuries, but was stopped by the tournament officials. Once she'd required assistance, her task was concluded and she was not permitted to resume it.

Five minutes after the one hour time limit, Harry finally surfaced with a young girl in tow.

"Gabrielle!" Fleur screamed. Throwing aside the blanket that she'd been wrapped in, she waded into the water and took the girl – her younger sister – from Harry, clinging to her anxiously until Madame Pomfrey intervened and assured her that the child was unharmed. Then she turned to Harry.

"You saved 'er!" Sobbing, she embraced him tightly, thanking him repeatedly. Completely out of control, she was unable to stop herself from kissing him on both cheeks again and again. For his part, Harry was still short of breath from his hour in the lake, and was quickly overwhelmed. He was in real danger of being overcome by her allure, not to mention the fact that she was attired only in a wet swimsuit, it was February, and her body was responding accordingly. As she pressed up against him his eyes began to glaze over.

More than a bit put out, Hermione intervened, inserting herself in between the two of them and enfolding Harry into her own blanket. To her surprise, this didn't faze the French witch at all. She simply expanded her gratitude to include the other Gryffindor, pulling her into a three way embrace. At that point Cedric and Cho came over and laughingly joined the hug, and the clever Chinese girl managed to rearrange things so that she and Cedric shared one blanket, while Fleur ended up with her own.

Realizing that she had nothing to feel threatened about, Hermione relaxed and the five of them talked things out as Fleur gradually calmed down. Everyone contributed their own perspective on what had happened, and another friendship began to take hold. Once Fleur had regained her composure she apologized profusely to Harry for her previous attitude, and he assured her that he understood.

From that point forward the four Hogwarts students - the two champions and their girlfriends - saw a different side of the

Beauxbatons champion. They discovered that inside she was a warm, thoughtful person who displayed a fierce loyalty to her friends and loved ones. Once she understood and accepted the situation Harry was in, she requested to be included in their group as they prepared for the third task. After only a brief series of glances and nods, they accepted.

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And now, here we are, Hermione mused as she returned her awareness to her present location. Fleur and Cho had rearranged their loungers as the sun had moved across the sky, and were now sitting up, facing her. She decided it was time for her to be more sociable, and turned to join in their conversation.

Her first thought, upon focusing on her companions, was that she should ask them to teach her the shaving charm they used. She decided that although the miniscule tuft of blonde hair looked good on Fleur, she preferred the small triangle of silky black hair that Cho sported, which would also work well with her own bushy brown curls.

As self conscious as broaching that topic would have made her, however, it was nothing compared to the conversation currently in progress between the other two witches – a very open and embarrassingly frank discussion about sex! More specifically, their first times.

Or, in Cho's case, her anticipated first time. She was planning on losing her virginity to Cedric on her 17th birthday, and Fleur was giving her tips that would 'enhance' the experience for both of them.

Hermione's bright red complexion was most definitely not due to sunburn. Seeing her thunderstruck expression, Fleur and Cho smiled graciously and explained.

The social, legal, and magical consequences of underage sex in the wizarding world were so severe that it simply did not happen. The practice of having sex on one's seventeenth birthday was an unintended consequence of this prohibition. The reason that Hermione didn't know about this situation was that, while she was somewhat aware of the lack of sexual activity among Hogwarts students, she hadn't really looked into the reasons as yet, figuring that issue was still a few years down the road for her.

The way her two friends explained it, she realized that the situation was somewhat analogous to the consumption of alcoholic beverages in the muggle world. Given a strictly forbidden activity that suddenly became legal with the turn of a calendar page, it was the custom for many young people to celebrate coming of age by going out on their birthday and getting thoroughly drunk. In like manner, apparently, witches and wizards wasted no time in engaging in sex at their first opportunity. (2)

Fleur informed the other girls that in her case, it had been the boy she'd been dating her previous year at Beauxbatons. It hadn't been all that pleasurable for her – he'd been too immature to handle her Veela aura – so over the following summer she'd sought out an older, more experienced lover. That had been better but it still wasn't all she was looking for. Her search for good sex had been put on hold when she'd come to Hogwarts for the Triwizard tournament. But now, she had her sights set on Bill Weasley, whom she'd met on the day of the Third Task, and she was hoping Hermione and Harry would help her get to know him better.

This discussion, naturally, caused Hermione to think about having sex with Harry. She knew it was still too early to consider actually doing it, since she was only fifteen, but there was no harm in fantasizing. Her body betrayed her by reacting to these lascivious thoughts, and it was more than just her face turning red again. Of course, her companions noticed this arousal.

"Is it the topic in general, or one boy in particular that has you so hot and bothered?" Cho teased.

Hermione was embarrassed, but smiled shyly and nodded, while her two friends giggled and assured her that they didn't blame her in the slightest. "I suppose it's the same way for wizards, as well as witches?" she inquired. Receiving an affirmative reply, she continued, "But what about the fact that your birthdays won't be the same?"

"If it's only a few months or less, usually the guy will wait," Cho revealed. "Otherwise ..." she shrugged, allowing the younger witch to draw the obvious conclusion.

Hermione bit back a gasp at the casualness of the whole thing. She was well aware that Cedric was more than a year older than Cho, but didn't want to embarrass her friend by pursuing that line of inquiry. But before the silence on the balcony could grow too awkward, Cho shrugged again and added. "Cedric and I weren't exclusive until a month before the Yule Ball." Hermione nodded and decided to move the discussion in a different direction.

"What about if the witch is older than the wizard?" she wondered. Fleur and Cho exchanged a glance.

"Zat ees not common," Fleur informed her. "Most witches have zere first affaire d'amour weeth an older wizard."

Hermione pondered this assertion, comparing it to her personal knowledge. Angelina Johnson was at least six months older than Fred Weasley, but again, they hadn't hooked up until the Yule Ball, two months after she'd turned seventeen.

"I'm ten months older than Harry," she pointed out with some trepidation.

Fleur and Cho shared an uneasy look. "Well, there are plenty of guys in the year ahead of you, and you'd have no problem ..." Cho began tentatively, before breaking off at the look of revulsion on Hermione's face. That option was most definitely not up for consideration!

"You can wait eef you so desire," Fleur reassured her. "And you know, zere are certain zings you can do in ze interim, zat can 'elp you enjoy ze wait."

The two older witches spent the next hour making increasingly explicit suggestions of all the types of sexual activity that could be engaged in by a man and a woman, short of intercourse, including several personal experiences. Cho described an encounter in the prefects' bath with Cedric, after they'd figured out the clue in the egg, that had Hermione's mouth opening and closing like a fish. It didn't take long for her to realize how simple it would be for her and Harry to arrange something similar, assuming at least one of them was appointed a prefect next year, which seemed almost certain. For her part, Fleur was particularly enthusiastic about a Beauxbatons classmate's skill with his tongue.

Eventually, Hermione resigned herself to having a permanent blush on her face for the duration of the conversation, and decided to just enjoy the naughty thoughts. It amused her to recall that only a week before she'd come to France, her mother had sat her down for a very similar, yet vastly different, talk on the same subject. With the additional information she'd learned today, not to mention the 'helpful' suggestions she was now receiving, she began to make some plans for the next two years.

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Harry looked around at the magical customs facility with some interest, but was mostly just trying to keep his mind occupied while he and his traveling companions, Sirius Black and Cedric Diggory, waited their turn. They were being accompanied, for security purposes, by Mad Eye Moody (the real one) and two other Aurors he'd just met, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora (but don't ever call her that) Tonks, which complicated the process.

Not surprisingly, Harry found himself comparing his situation now to where he had been a year ago at this time.

Last year, Sirius had been on the run, a wanted, escaped murderer. Now he was a free man, his status restored, and on his way to taking his rightful place in wizarding society. There was still a way to go, both in his recovery from his ordeal, and in the public's acceptance of his innocence, but both were progressing steadily.

Last year, Cedric had been merely an acquaintance, a Hufflepuff with whom he'd competed at quidditch, and with whom he'd traveled to the World Cup. Now, he was one of his best friends, a fellow champion with whom he'd bonded while sharing a series of incredible challenges.

Last year, Cho Chang had been a pretty girl who'd caught his eye as an opposing seeker at a quidditch match. Now she was Hermione's best friend, and a loyal supporter of his as well. Last year, he'd never even heard of Veela, or something called the Triwizard Tournament. Now, he'd not only met, but competed against a woman of Veela descent, Fleur Delacour, in that very same competition.

And last year, he'd been stuck at Privet Drive for the summer, as usual, and hoping that he and Hermione would become more than friends. Now, they were firmly established as boyfriend and girlfriend, likely on the way to even more than that. 'Well,' he thought as he grinned to himself, 'at least that part turned out the way I planned. It was the most normal thing about the whole year!' As for his summer living arrangements, instead of being with his relatives, he was on his way to spend the next month at the family estate of the very same Fleur Delacour, the French Triwizard champion, along with his fellow Hogwarts champion Cedric, his girlfriend Cho, and, of course, Hermione. Also staying with them, for at least parts of the time, would be Hermione's parents and Sirius. It would be the first real holiday he'd ever experienced!

The customs official announced that they would need to wait while he called in some French Aurors for consultation, and Harry returned to his contemplation about the new set of friends he'd gained. It had all solidified around the events of the second task of the tournament.

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The tournament officials were perplexed as to how to score the task. Cedric had clearly won the event, and would receive the top score (only 45, due to blatant favoritism by Karkaroff). The rest was a muddle. Harry had, along with Cedric, been the first to the hostages, but he was the last to surface. His hostage, however, had come up first. Krum had been the third to reach the hostages, and the second to the surface. Fleur hadn't even reached the hostages, but her hostage was returned safely by another champion. The final decision was to award Krum second place, Harry third place, and Fleur fourth. Harry greeted this decision with a shrug. He was still in last place overall, which was his stated intention.

Things moved relatively smoothly from that point to the third task, and a close camaraderie developed between Cedric, Fleur, and himself. They all trained together, researching possible traps, creatures, and enchantments they might encounter in the maze that was to be their final challenge. Harry learned everything he could, although he'd hoped not to need to use any of it.

He received a pleasant surprise on the day of the task itself. Hermione had learned from Fleur and Cedric that their families

would be attending the final event, and she fretted that Harry wouldn't have anyone there for him. The Dursleys weren't even worth considering, and her own parents, being muggles, would also not be able to attend.

When Ginny heard of her concern, she suggested that her family stand in for Harry. Fred and George immediately and enthusiastically endorsed the idea, and promised to keep Ron in line. That hadn't really been necessary, however, as Ron had long since come around to Harry's side. He still kept his distance, though, as Hermione was in no mood to be forgiving of what she considered his betrayal of her best friend/boyfriend.

But the Weasley family had turned out in full force (except for Percy, who'd insisted that he was required to maintain neutrality) and Harry had enjoyed their company and support. As it happened, he wasn't the only one who benefited from their visit, as he'd noticed Fleur and Bill exchanging several glances of interest. Personally, he thought it could be a pretty good match, as Fleur clearly required someone more mature than a typical schoolboy, and Bill was experienced and worldly enough to be able to handle a Veela.

The plan to let Cedric or Fleur win had been quickly derailed. While they were concerned about the possible danger to Harry from the plot that had entered him in the competition in the first place, they were not prepared for the lengths to which Moody, eventually revealed as the polyjuiced Barty Crouch, Jr., was willing to go. He'd secretly Imperiused the fourth champion, Viktor Krum, intending to use him to attack and eliminate the other competitors, leaving only Harry left to take the Champion's Cup.

Harry's intention had been to enter the maze last, find a quiet corner, sit down and wait it out. That had failed when he'd needed to rescue first Fleur, and then Cedric. At that point the three of them had decided that it would be safest to stay together. Together they had taken the Cup, which had been enchanted into a portkey.

Fortunately, the enemies waiting for them at the portkey's destination, a deserted graveyard, hadn't been expecting three champions to arrive instead of one. Working together, they'd defeated and captured Pettigrew and a stunted, ugly little creature that contained Voldemort's essence. And, for good measure, they also nabbed Crouch, Jr., when they returned to Hogwarts. (3)

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As a result, life had been a total pandemonium for the past month. Harry had thought that being the Boy Who Lived was bad, but it was nothing like this! He would have been more than happy to give all the credit to Cedric, but the honorable Hufflepuff had insisted on sharing. They were both annoyed that Fleur's contribution had been underplayed by the British press, but she'd assured them that she didn't mind.

On the positive side of the ledger, Sirius had been exonerated! And now Fleur (in a move that Harry considered to be an absolute lifesaver!) had invited them all to France to get away from the craziness. The reason that Hermione and Cho were not traveling with them was that the French witch had decided to have the two of them arrive a few days early for some 'girl time'. Because of that, and everything else that had been going on, Harry hadn't seen Hermione for a while, and was looking forward to being with her again.

When they were finally cleared through French customs, they parted with their Auror escort and activated the portkey they'd been provided, and were instantly transported to a secluded chateau. There they were greeted first by a house elf, and soon after by a beautiful woman who could only be Fleur's mother.

"Welcome to Châteaux Delacour," she announced with a warm smile, somewhat amused at the look of wonder on Harry's face as he took in his surroundings.

Sirius stepped forward and kissed her hand, and she responded by kissing him on both cheeks in typical French fashion. Cedric followed the older man's lead, and that prompted Harry to stop gawking and do likewise. Sirius then inquired as to the whereabouts of the other guests when Harry started looking around again, wondering where Hermione was.

Madame Delacour informed them that the Grangers were off on a tour of some local vineyards, and that the girls were still getting dressed. Harry wondered at that last comment, as it was late in the afternoon. He shared a raised eyebrow with Cedric, who shrugged to indicate that he was likewise mystified.

Suddenly the three young women appeared, and all other thoughts among the three newcomers vanished. They were attired in lightweight garments that might, by a large stretch of the definition, be considered robes, but in Harry's mind were better described as sundresses. They were made of a thin fabric in pastel colors that appeared to be nearly transparent, but somehow, most likely magically, preserved the witches' modesty. It certainly gave the impression, however, that they were wearing little, if anything, underneath!

Fleur's reminded Harry of the style seen in depictions of Greek goddesses, tied at the shoulders and dipping low in the front and back in loose folds. Hermione's was light blue (a color he thought looked really good on her), a halter style with a low V neckline and bare back, while Cho's was a different halter style with a higher neck but even more exposed back, which nicely suited her petite figure.

After gaping for several seconds, Harry moved quickly to Hermione while Cedric did the same with Cho. (For his part, Sirius found himself calculating the age difference between himself and Fleur, and wondering if she was attached. Harry and Hermione would later politely discourage this line of thought.)

"You look absolutely incredible!" Harry murmured while they wrapped each other in a tight hug. "And I've really missed you."

Hermione held onto the hug longer than would be normal for a greeting, but wasn't concerned because Cho was doing the same thing with Cedric. "I've missed you too," she agreed. "But I've had a great time here."

"So, what have you lot been doing for the past three days?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"Not much," Hermione responded, pulling back and shooting him an impish grin. "Just sunning ourselves in the nude all day and talking about sex."

Harry stared at her open mouthed, uncertain if she was having him on. He glanced at Cho, but she was still wrapped up with Cedric (who, he'd realize later, was in a daze of his own), then at Fleur, who shot him a salacious wink.

Finally Hermione broke the hug and took his hand, announcing that she was going to show him to his room. But as they left the others in the entrance hall, she leaned and destroyed anything that remained of his ability to speak by whispering in his ear.

"And later, I'll show you my tan."

It was going to be a very interesting month!

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(1) Alert readers will recall the effect this lack of tan lines had on Harry at the beginning of third year.

(2) I'm not comfortable with writing underage sex, and have largely avoided it in my stories. I'm aware of the statistics that say about half of American teens have had sex by the time they reach 17, but my main protagonists (i.e. – Harry and Hermione) nearly always wait until they're married, or at least engaged, before making love. The one exception was Adventures in the Prefects' Bath, and what exactly happened there was intentionally vague.

In this story I've simply devised a way to eliminate underage sex so I don't have to deal with it, by declaring that there is a strong enough taboo – legal, social, and magical – that it just doesn't happen. The natural consequence of these repressed desires, it seems to me, would be that teens would engage in sex at their first opportunity, upon coming of age. So I've also created the 'tradition' of having sex on one's seventeenth birthday. No one questions it because it's 'always' been that way. Just like a lot of things in the wizarding world, apparently.

(3) This part of the story happened almost exactly the same way as in my aforementioned fanfic, Adventures in the Prefects' Bath (excepting, however, all of the scenes in the prefects' bath). Rather than rewrite that section practically word for word, I suggest that those interested in more details of the journey through the maze and the battle at the graveyard may wish to reread that part of that story.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

A/N This is the extra material I decided to add. Next will be a short epilogue, then we're finished.

Epilogue

Harry waited impatiently in the antechamber near the front of the church, fidgeting and tugging at his tie, to the amusement of the other men waiting with him. In a few minutes he would meet Hermione at the altar. It would be the final one of the many times he'd met Hermione Granger. After this she would be Hermione Potter, and besides that, if he had his way they'd never be parted again.

It had been an easy decision to ask Cho and Cedric to stand up for them on this special occasion, and likewise Neville. Hermione had been undecided on her second attendant. She'd first wanted Fleur, but the stunning French witch had passed, not wanting to risk distracting any attention away from Hermione. As she pointed out, she couldn't turn off her Veela powers, and muggle men had no resistance to it whatsoever. She'd finally picked Susan over Ginny, since the pretty Hufflepuff was currently dating Neville.

Fleur and Ginny would get their turns at the wizarding bonding ceremony that was to be held the next day in Ottery St. Catchpole, jointly hosted by the Weasleys, the Diggorys, and the Delacours.

But for now, there was nothing for Harry to do but wait. And reflect.

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After the turmoil of their first four years at Hogwarts, the last three finally were normal. That was not to say they were without drama, but it was the sort of drama one might normally find in a school.

It began with the awarding of the Prefect badges for their fifth year. Cedric's Head Boy badge arrived while they were in France, as did Hermione's Prefect badge. Harry had been disappointed, but enthusiastically congratulated his friend and his girlfriend on their accomplishment. (1)

The other three students were outraged. Without telling Harry, each of them wrote letters to Hogwarts. Cho informed Professor Flitwick that she was undecided about remaining a prefect, and incidentally inquired as to who the new fifth year ones were. Cedric wrote the Headmaster and Professor Sprout that he was still deliberating about whether to accept the Head Boy position. He too, asked about

the new prefect assignments. Hermione was the most direct. She wrote to Professor McGonagall that she appreciated the honor of being named prefect and was considering her response, adding that it would be influenced by who the male prefect was. She commented that she assumed that it would be someone who had demonstrated leadership, and whom the other students looked up to. Her implication was crystal clear.

Unbeknownst to all of them, Neville had written a letter of his own, returning the Prefect badge that had been given to him. He declared that it was not right for it to go to anyone other than Harry Potter. (2)

There was an enormous uproar when these letters were revealed in the next staff meeting at Hogwarts. Three of the Heads of House threatened to resign, along with several other professors. Snape scoffed at these actions, but did grudgingly agree that Potter was more deserving of the position than Longbottom.

When the Board of Governors heard about these threatened resignations and the reasons for them, several of the members questioned whether Dumbledore had finally taken leave of his senses. His eccentric ways, long cultivated to keep others off balance, were now working to his disadvantage. Two weeks of intense negotiation ended with Dumbledore resigning as Headmaster 'in order to devote all of his time to his Wizengamot duties and finding a way to permanently end the Voldemort threat'. McGonagall had been named interim headmistress, and naturally her first action was to make Harry a prefect!

Dumbledore indeed had his work cut out for him. Most pressing was the need to magically secure Voldemort's essence until the dark lord's attempts at immortality could be negated. As Chief Warlock he worked with the new Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones (Fudge did not survive the Sirius Black scandal), to ensure that the known Death Eaters were imprisoned this time, using testimony from Barty Crouch, Jr. and Pettigrew. Bones's first action was to begin a corruption investigation, which would eventually ferret out payments that had been made to let certain well-connected Death Eaters go free.

The 1st of September saw some major announcements at Hogwarts, as McGonagall was intent on making changes to correct the abuses she'd seen as the Deputy, but been powerless to correct. The new

number one priority of the faculty would be excellent teaching, and number two would be collegiality. There would be no more appointments made for 'political' reasons. And students would be held accountable for their behavior, regardless of house affiliation.

Snape had already resigned before the start of the term. He'd easily seen what was coming, and he'd never enjoyed teaching anyway. He'd been forced into the position by Dumbledore, and now he was free of that pressure. Hagrid was persuaded to return to being the gamekeeper. Binns and Trelawny were replaced, Divination was downgraded to an upper year elective, and the Muggle Studies curriculum was to be revamped. By the time Harry and Hermione finished their seven years, the new Hogwarts scarcely resembled the one they'd started at.

Cedric quickly picked up on McGonagall's themes of competence and collegiality, and as Head Boy he worked hard to encourage his fellow students to improve their relationships, both within their houses and across house boundaries. As prefects, Harry and Hermione worked at reaching out to more of their housemates, and the fifth year Gryffindors became a particularly close knit class. This included Ron, whom Hermione agreed to tolerate for form's sake. But, as Harry pointed out, Ron had turned out to be a pretty good guy most of the time, at least when he wasn't being jealous of Harry. And Harry frequently made Hermione smile by reminding her that as far as he was concerned, having her for a girlfriend would give any guy reason to be jealous of him.

It took longer, but they also began to make inroads toward interhouse cooperation after Hermione suggested in a prefects meeting that they form study groups for OWLs. A problem arose, however, when she had to overcome the urge to be in charge of every subject, setting schedules and determining material for revising. Not to mention that all of the good students wanted to study with her!

It didn't take much urging from Harry for the other prefects to step up to help, particularly after he offered to lead the DADA study session. Hermione claimed Arithmency and Transfiguration, while Padma Patil took Ancient Runes and Charms, also suggesting her sister Parvati for Divination. This gave everyone a chuckle at the expression of distaste that flashed across Hermione's face at the mere mention of her least favorite subject.

Hannah Abbott volunteered for Herbology if Neville would help her, which brought a full blush to the shy Gryffindor's face when he was so informed later that evening in the Gryffindor common room. One by one the other prefects stepped up and soon all the courses were accounted for. McGonagall allowed them to set up in the Great Hall, and clusters of students began gathering at the different tables every evening.

The experiment proved to be an unqualified success, both socially and academically, and was so popular it was repeated the following two years. Their class ranked among the best in recent memory on both OWLs and NEWTs, and many new friendships were formed. As expected, Hermione finished at the top of the class, with O's across the board, and Harry was quite satisfied with his collection of O's and E's, which to both his and Hermione's delight placed him 8th overall.

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The Gryffindor quidditch team continued its winning ways. Ron won the tryout to replace Oliver Wood as keeper, but his play was, to put it charitably, uneven. Given the unmatched skill of their chasers and beaters, they still won all their matches, but they were high scoring affairs. The closest game that year was with Hufflepuff, where Harry and Cedric put on quite a show for the professional scouts in the stands before Harry finally caught the snitch.

The Ravenclaw match was memorable in a different way, as Cho raised her distraction technique to another level. She began by giving Harry a kiss during the prematch handshake (having previously cleared this with a highly amused Hermione and Cedric) and continued by marking him so closely throughout the match that it sometimes seemed as though they were sharing a single broomstick.

When Harry caught the snitch despite her efforts, he joked during their post-game hug that if she really wanted to distract him she would've played the match in the nude. She teasingly shot back that she might consider that for the next year. Unfortunately, Fred and George overheard and were soon enthusiastically pushing the concept of a Naked Quidditch Match to anyone who would listen. Quite a few males in the castle were all for it, particularly if it

involved the Gryffindor chasers or the Ravenclaw seeker, or better yet, both. Angelina Johnson finally brought the idea to a screeching halt when she let Fred know in no uncertain terms exactly what it would cost him if he kept pursuing that nonsense.

All three of the other seekers easily defeated Draco Malfoy yet again, causing him to be thrown off the Slytherin team at the end of the year. Hogwarts had indeed changed, and not at all in his favor. Early on in the year McGonagall had stripped him of his Prefect badge for repeated abuse of his position. His whining about his father had no effect since Lucius Malfoy was powerless to interfere, having plenty of legal problems of his own to deal with. (That year was the last they would see of the conceited blonde ferret, since he elected to transfer to Durmstrang for the final two years of his schooling. After a while word came back that he'd been killed in a duel at his new school. Evidently he'd mouthed off one time too many.)

Sixth year was a rebuilding year for Gryffindor, as they needed to replace two beaters and two chasers. Harry captained the team, assisted by Katie Bell. Ginny took one of the open chaser slots, and proved to be quite talented at it. Ron was challenged for the keeper position by a large seventh year, Cormac McLaggen, and Harry and Katie decided to put both on the team, intending to play whoever was doing best in practice prior to each game. That lasted less than a month until the obnoxious McLaggen alienated the entire team with his constant criticism and complaining. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when Harry finally informed him that his services were no longer required.

They didn't win every match, but did take the Quidditch Cup on overall points. To quite a few onlookers' disappointment, Cho did not in fact play her last match in the nude, explaining with a saucy grin that as Head Girl she had to set a proper example.

For his last year when Harry was named Head Boy he relinquished the quidditch captaincy to Ron, who was much, much more passionate about the sport than he was. Even Hermione had to admit that it was a touching moment when Ron held up the Quidditch Cup after his final game as a Gryffindor with tears in his eyes.

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As for Harry's relationship with Hermione, she told him the evening he arrived in France about her discussion with Cho and Fleur, and that she'd come up with a two-year plan. They would gradually increase their level of intimacy one step at a time, starting with Harry's fifteenth birthday (which was the next day).

Accordingly, the following morning she took him out to another private balcony and introduced him to the joys and wonders of topless sunbathing. It took Harry a full ten minutes before he could look at her without his breath catching or his heart racing. His initial inclination was that this was a 'look, but don't touch' invitation but after another half hour Hermione decisively put an end to that misconception.

The two of them would manage several more visits to that sunning balcony during their month in France, culminating with an outing to a beach on the French Riviera. There, Harry had the good sense and the presence of mind to devote most of his attention to his enchanting girlfriend.

For the rest of his life Harry would have fond memories of the blue and white string bikini that Hermione made such good use of that summer.

On Hermione's birthday, back at Hogwarts, the two new prefects shared a revealing rendezvous in the prefects' bath. Throughout that year they made periodic visits to that facility to continue their explorations, and became thoroughly familiar with each other's bodies, each learning how the other liked to be touched.

Harry very soon came to regard Hermione's plan as simply brilliant! On each birthday thereafter they took another step along the path she'd devised, culminating with making love for the first time on Harry's seventeenth.

On that day Harry offered a surprise amendment to the plan when he presented her with an engagement ring at dinner. He'd known that even though she had accepted the wizarding custom, in the back of her mind she'd still been uneasy about going through with it before she had a ring on her finger. After that lovely surprise, she'd been even more enthusiastic that night, if that were possible.

During their final year at Hogwarts the loving couple made full use of their Head Boy and Head Girl privileges!

But before that, there were other significant events to celebrate with their friends. Prior to sixth year the other two couples, Bill and Fleur, and Cedric and Cho, announced their engagements. The following summer, shortly after Harry's most memorable birthday, Harry and Hermione would participate in both weddings.

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Harry rarely interacted with Albus Dumbledore after the ancient wizard resigned from Hogwarts, which took some getting used to after all the time they'd spent together during his first three years. In hindsight, he realized that the headmaster had begun distancing himself already during the tournament. On those occasions when their paths did cross, Dumbledore seemed to regard him with a confusing expression – part disappointment, part regret, with a touch of sadness.

Harry assumed that the man probably missed Hogwarts – after all, he'd been associated with the institution for such a long time. But Dumbledore was busy now with the Wizengamot and the Death Eater trials, not to mention having to figure out a way to destroy Voldemort's spirit. And Harry was quite happy to not have to worry about that issue! As far as he was concerned, the former dark lord was no longer his problem; he'd done more than his part! What was quite curious, though, was the odd reaction of the former headmaster when he noticed that Harry's scar had changed.

The itching in the scar gradually lessened for two years, then stopped completely after his seventeenth birthday. He'd felt as though something shook loose when he gave Hermione her engagement ring and asked her to marry him, then 'celebrated' later (although he was too preoccupied to give it much thought at the time!). The scar had begun to fade after that, and now it was just a faint white line. It hadn't bothered him in years. All was well. (3)

-oooOOOooo-

It was time. Harry walked out into the church to meet Hermione once more, this time coming down the aisle. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. For Hermione, things were a bit fuzzy due to

the moisture gathering in her eyes, but to her, Harry had never looked better. He took her hand as she joined him at the front of the church and smiled.

"Fancy meeting you here," he quipped. She beamed at him, knowing he was trying to help her relax.

"I'm glad to see you remembered how to get out here," she responded in a cheeky retort. He grinned broadly at her allusion to the first words she'd ever spoken to him, and squeezed her hand.

The two of them turned to face the priest to make the vows that would bind them from that day forward. They had a long life together ahead of them and they were going to live it to the fullest.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

(1) I always assumed that Cedric was a 7th year during the Triwizard Tournament, but have recently read some fanfics where he was a 6th year. I realized that this was probably correct, because he and his father used the portkey to travel to the Quidditch World Cup. If he'd been of age he would have apparated to the location like Percy, Charlie, and Bill did. Therefore, he must have turned 17 sometime between late August and the end of October, making it likely that he was in fact a 6th year. The HP Lexicon concurs.

(2) I wonder if Ron in Book 5 even considered turning down the Prefect Badge. It was pretty clear that he knew that Harry deserved it more than he did.

(3) Readers may assume that if Horcruxes do exist in this story, Dumbledore eventually successfully tracked them down and destroyed them. And if by chance there was one in Harry's scar, it evidently couldn't survive the intense emotion of love he experienced that evening. After all, love was supposed to be 'the power he knows not', right?

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

A/N So, another story comes to a close. I want to thank everyone again for such an enthusiastic response. I have more stories in development, including a short and sweet one-shot that's already finished. I haven't decided which one to focus on next after that one

– I'm leaning toward something that's post-Hogwarts – but you should see the results in another month or so.